Woman in Saudi Arabia
Cross - Cultural Views

غَينـاء للنشـر
Ghainaa Publications

Ghainaa Publications
Fax:+966 (1) 2295019
ghainaabook@hotmail.com

First Edition
2008

In the Name of God

Most Gracious, Most Merciful

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Saudi Women and the Labor Market

Saudi Women: A Japanese Perspective

An Overview of the Economic Reality of Saudi Women

Legend of Arabia

Western Misperceptions of Saudi Women

Negative Western Portrayals of Saudi Women -- Why?

Part Two
Field Survey

Women and Social Affairs

Women and Saudi Media

Saudi Women and Western Media

Conclusion: Saudi Women… Obstacles and Ambitions

Prologue:

Many in both the East and the West agree that nations and civilizations develop and prosper if a full accord between cultural evolution and developmental accomplishment takes place. In order to achieve development, inconsistency should not occur between these two main aspects, otherwise development is futile, inspiring no history, transforming no culture and surveying no vision.

In the march of past and present nations and civilizations, women remain essential and the right hand to men, in all aspects of development, achievement and the advancement of civilization. The nature of women's participation in the civilization process emanates from the ideology and cultural peculiarity of each society. For instance, women in the East are not identical to women in the West and they would never take on their image. Their differences are natural and result from their differences in faith and thought. Rational and fair people understand and realize this fact.

Saudi women are no exception from other women. They live within a cultural system that derives its values and instructions from the Islamic *sharia*, and they use this *sharia* as a light in this life and the hereafter. For

this reason, Saudi women have not been immune from the suspicions of Westerners or Westernized persons who often try to impose a certain Western model on Saudi women's lives. These suspicions have been high amid the recent events and developments that target any non - Western cultural aspect.

This book includes reflections, ideas and thoughts about several issues surrounding Saudi women. The authors include Saudi women and fair-minded women from the United States, Britain, France and Japan.

In addition to theoretical approaches, the book presents a field survey, which adopts a scientific methodology in research and questionnaires. The field survey covers a host of topics tackled in the theoretical part of the book. A group of Saudi women, who occupy prominent positions in the social structure, were involved in designing and carrying out this survey.

The purpose of this book is to present Saudi women's issues by Saudi women themselves. Their situation is also conveyed through voices of other women, but not through the writings of Saudi or other men who may presume to speak or write about Saudi women.

The Publisher

The Contributors

Dr. Al-Jawhara Bubshait is a faculty member at the College of Education, King Faisal University in Dammam, eastern province of Saudi Arabia. She obtained her BSC and MSC in education management and planning from Ohio University, U.S. and her PhD from Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah. As a member of many academic committees she has taken part in a number of conferences, forums and workshops inside and outside the Kingdom. Published a number of research in both Arabic and English languages. (Saudi Arabia)

Dr. Amal Al-Suwaiyeh is assistant professor at the Girls' College of Education of King Saud University. Specializing in chemistry, she is concerned with scientific fields in chemistry and education particularly self-development areas. (Saudi Arabia)

Ann Morris is a political reporter for a number of British newspapers. She has also been a columnist for: *The Observer*, T*he Evening Standard* and The *Daily Telegraph* before taking over Morris International Associates (MIA) Donovan in 1991. MIA publishes magazines and also acts as media consultants specializing in the Arab and Islamic worlds. The aim of the company is to develop better understanding between the West and the Arab World. (Britain)

Dr. Badriya Al-Bishr is assistant professor at the *Da'wa* (Islamic propagation) and mass communications department of Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh. She obtained her PhD in *Da'wa* in 2001, and is a member of the Saudi society for *Da'wa* studies. She is also a regular contributor in Saudi newspapers and magazines and takes part in seminars and events concerned with Islamic propagation. (Saudi Arabia)

Barbara G.B. Ferguson is the Washington Bureau chief for *Arab News* and has covered and reported on the Middle East for 25 years. She also regularly teaches U.S. officials, Marines and soldiers deploying to Iraq on "Arab Culture and Islam." (United States)

Caroline Montagu has an MA from Cambridge University and an MA from London University in Middle East Politics and Society. She has been visiting Saudi Arabia regularly since 1984. She started writing on business subjects and later moved to social and women's issues in Saudi Arabia. In 1985 she published *Investment in Saudi Arabia, Opportunities for Joint Ventures*, the first British in-depth analysis of industrial development. (Britain)

Cisse Maud has a Bachelor's degree in philosophy from the Sorbonne, and a PhD in the history of Christianity. She is concerned with historical and philosophical studies, particularly those related to the history of Christianity. She is a translator and teacher, among other professions. (France)

Huda Al-Jeraisy, owner of Al-Areeba Center, has a BA in translation (French-English-Arabic) from the University of Geneva, Switzerland. She has assumed a number of posts in the public and private sectors and served as chairperson and member of a number of national and professional committees. She takes part in the organization of many women's gatherings concerned with businesswomen's programs and activities. She has attended and taken part in numerous seminars and workshops. (Saudi Arabia)

Dr. Muneera Al-Ameel is head of the mathematics department at the Girls' College of Education. She has a PhD in mathematical statistics, and a BSC in mathematics. She took part in summer programs organized by King Abdulaziz and his Companions Foundation for the Gifted. She is concerned with computer and thinking skills. (Saudi Arabia)

Dr. Nada Brinji is assistant professor of French literature at the European languages department of the College of Arts and Humanities, King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah. She was awarded the Excellence Performance Award for 2006 *Hajj* season. She has a collection of poetry in the French language and a number of publications about Saudi literature in French language. (Saudi Arabia)

Namie Tsujigami is presently a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University, Japan. She has an MA in Gender and Identity in the Middle East Institute of Arab Islamic Studies, University of Exeter and another MA in economics. The subject of her dissertation is the *Changing Role of Zakah in Saudi Arabia*. Concerned with the status of women in the Arab and Islamic world. From January 2007 to the present, she is a visiting Researcher at the King Faisal Research Center for Islamic Studies, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (Japan)

Norah Al-Fayez is general manager of the women's branch of the Institute of Public Administration in Riyadh. She is a member of a number of committees, such as the consultative commission of the national museum and the consultative commission of King Abdulaziz and His Men's Foundation for the Gifted. She takes part in a number of research studies in the academic world. (Saudi Arabia)

Ruqaya Al-Aloola is assistant director of education supervision department in the Riyadh region. She obtained her MSC in educational management and educational supervision from the University of Tennessee in the United States. She has taken part in a host of educational gatherings and is an active participant in educational conferences both inside and outside the Kingdom. Currently she works at the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) in Riyadh. (Saudi Arabia)

Dr. Samar Al-Saqaf is dean of the female students section at King Abdulaziz University with a specialty in anatomy and embryology. She was the deputy dean of the University's college of medicine for four years and was head of the women's committee at the Saudi scientific club. She has received a number of awards and medals, including the award for best resident doctor from King Saud University, three times, and was nominated for the award of the International Bibliographical Center of Cambridge University in the UK as the global distinguished heath specialist in 2005. (Saudi Arabia)

Siham Al-Shihri is assistant researcher at the research center of King Faisal Specialist Hospital. He is also a Member of the Saudi Chemist Company, with an MSC in chemical research from the University of Reading, UK in 2005. (Saudi Arabia)

Tanya C. Hsu is a political analyst focusing on Saudi Arabian and U.S. relations. She is a former director of development and senior research analyst for the Institute for Research: Middle East Policy in Washington, DC. For almost two decades Ms. Hsu has created and facilitated connections between Middle Eastern leaders, diplomats and businessmen and women. Her research coverage includes Middle East conflict resolution, Gulf economic issues and international policy between the Arab world and the United States. Her analysis has been published and recognized throughout the U.S., Europe and the Middle East. (United States)

Part One

Philosophical Frame of the Book’s Theme

Saudi Women's Education: History, Reality and Challenges

(Dr. Al-Jawhara Bubshait)

Introduction:

Historically women's education in the territories now known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has passed through several stages. In the pre-Islamic era, Arab society had not been concerned with any kind of systematic education for either males or females. At that time the transfer of experiences and skills from one generation to the next occurred through traditional social intermingling.

Islam has strongly encouraged its followers of both sexes to seek education. At the same time Islam has elevated the position of *ulema* (Muslim scholars) and those seeking knowledge. Allah says in the holy Qur'an: "*God will rise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted (mystic) Knowledge. And God is well-acquainted with all ye do." (58:11), and says: "Those truly fear God, among His Servants, who have knowledge*." (35:28). Here the holy Qur'an addresses both men and women.

Despite the fact that there were not many official educational centers and institutions, Muslim society sought education in various places, the most important of which was mosques. Although efforts focused on male education, females, too, received significant attention in this regard. The Prophet's wife Aisha narrated thousands of *hadiths* (sayings of Prophet Muhammad) that many scholars depend upon for establishing their jurisprudence views. Aisha herself had many jurisprudence views.

This prosperous Islamic era was followed by a period of backwardness particularly in the central area of the Arabian Peninsula. Education and women were most affected by this backwardness. Poverty and hardship of life attributed greatly to the marginalization of the role of learning and also deprived women from engaging in the learning process. Despite the relative improvement of the situation following the call for reform by Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul Wahab in the mid-18th century, the social traditions and tribal norms were too deeply rooted to be changed during the first phase of the reform call.

The modern Saudi state emerged in the midst of this difficult situation and its leaders have required great wisdom to convince their own people of the importance of education. Fortunately the state has succeeded in that. In the following pages I will review the march of the educational process since that period until our present time.

Pre-official Education

In the past, Saudi girls, like boys, received their early education at unofficial schools called "*katateeb*" where a lady or a group of ladies assigned a room in their homes

for teaching holy Qur'an, the basics of reading and writing, and the principles of mathematics.

Citizens contributed funding for the monthly salaries of the teachers of these *katateeb*, although some teachers volunteered and didn't accept any payment. These *katateeb* existed all over the Kingdom and in Makkah alone there were around 43 of them.

At the same time, some parents taught their daughters the holy Qur'an and the basics of reading and writing at home. In addition, special areas were furnished near mosques for women to listen to Friday sermons and lessons delivered by preachers.

At a later stage, a group of citizens upgraded these *katateeb* to become private schools. The girls' private school in Makkah, established in 1942, was the first girls' private school in Saudi Arabia. This school was established some 18 years before the establishment of the Presidency of Girls Education, which is the government department concerned with girls' education. Between 1942 and 1950, a number of private schools were established around the Kingdom in Jeddah, Madinah, Taif, the eastern province and Riyadh. The *katateeb* and private schools received cash and other support from the ministry of education.

These *katateeb* and private schools remained active until the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, when official girls' education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established. Education historians believe that those early *katateeb* and private schools greatly contributed in providing educational opportunities for girls and equipped them with necessary experiences and skills that suited women's nature and roles in society.

Saudi Women's Education Faced Challenges:

At its early beginnings, official education for Saudi woman faced many obstacles and challenges, which caused the delay of official women's education for 30 years after the establishment of the Saudi state.

These obstacles were attributed to the social and economic conditions in the Arabian Peninsula, on one hand, and the customs and traditions that prevailed before the establishment of the Saudi state, on the other. The accumulation of wrong concepts and negative customs had encouraged many social forces to turn away from the idea of modern official education for women. This had limited educational opportunities for women at the same time as males' official education received wide social acceptance and, consequently, schools were opened in every city and village.

To solve this social obstacle and convince citizens of the importance of females' education, the government adopted a step-by-step policy. It encouraged the media, in particular, the press, to discuss the issue and also convinced public opinion leaders to adopt the issue and explain it to the public.

The government succeeded in provoking lively discussion. Many questions were raised about the legitimacy of education for females from an Islamic point of view, its social and economic benefits, what sciences women should learn, and up until what stage females should be allowed to continue their education. Newspapers began interviewing *ulema* (Muslim scholars), notables, opinion leaders and intellectuals to discuss the issue and answer queries from the public.

Despite the difference in opinions about how profitable education was for women, there was nearly a consensus that education for women is an Islamic duty as well as a government responsibility that should be fulfilled, especially when material support and social justification for it were readily available.

These efforts led to the diminishing of social resistance to women's education and, to the contrary, society became a strong supporter for women's education. The Saudi government began to strongly support women's education and encouraged citizens to demand excellent education for women. In fact, cities and villages began to compete with each other in their efforts to build more girls' schools.

In 1959 a Royal Decree was issued stipulating the opening of government girls schools in the Kingdom. The Decree noted that this move was taken in accordance to the wish of *ulema* (Muslim scholars) and that the objective of girls' education was to teach the holy Qur'an, Islamic subjects, and sciences that run in harmony with the Islamic teachings like house management and children's upbringing.

The Royal Decree underlined that this type of education would not be a gateway for any changes to the Islamic faith or values and it would cause no harm to youngsters' morals or social traditions.

The Royal Decree, moreover, formed a commission made up of Muslim scholars who reported to the Grand Mufti of the Kingdom, in order to supervise these schools, prepare their programs and monitor their performance. The Decree stipulated that female teachers of good Islamic

faith should be selected to work in these schools.

The Decree also stipulated that all private schools that had already been established in the Kingdom were to be under the new official education department.

This Royal Decree has led to significant development of girls' education in the Kingdom. This development started with the establishment of the Presidency of Girls Education in 1960. The Presidency recently merged with the ministry of education.

The Foundation of Saudi Women's Education:

Saudi Arabia's education policy derives its pillars from Islam.

An educational policy document released in 1970 identified a number of bases and principles that formed the general lines for boys and girls educational system in Saudi Arabia. The document underlined that among the key objectives of education is to help individuals know their God and religion; have people's attitudes and behavior be in harmony with the Islamic *sharia*; meet society's requirements; and achieve the objectives of the nation. The document, moreover, covers all educational aspects at different stages like plans, curricula, educational aids and administrative regulations.

The education policy has set forth articles to identify the foundation upon which woman education was based. These can be summarized in the following points:

1- Women's education aims at the proper Islamic upbringing of a Saudi woman to enable her to perform her duties in life, to be a successful

housewife, an ideal wife, and a good mother. Women's education also aims at qualifying a woman to perform jobs that match her instincts like teaching, nursing and medicine.

2- The government will pay close attention to women's education and provide necessary facilities to every school aged child and give girls opportunities in the types of education that suit her nature and meet the needs of the country.

3- Co-education is prohibited in all educational stages except in nurseries and kindergartens.

4- Women's educational process shall be carried out in an atmosphere of decency and shall be in accordance with the Islamic teachings.

Development of Women's Education in Saudi Arabia

General Education:

In 1960, the General Presidency for Girls Education (GPGE) started with the opening of 15 government girls' schools. In 2003, the number of schools reached more than 13,000. While in 1960, the number of female students was only 5,000, by 2003 it had jumped to around 3 million. These figures indicate the growing acceptance girls' education has enjoyed in Saudi society in a relatively short period. Schools spread in all parts of the Kingdom and even in remote Bedouin areas.

As some of these schools are far away from the GPGE headquarters in the capital Riyadh, administrative and supervision units were established near these schools to follow up, provide any help that the schools may need,

monitor the educational process at these schools, and execute the different programs and plans approved by the Presidency.

The holy Qur'an has an especially important place in the Saudi education policy. Holy Qur'an teaching schools were opened covering all general education stages (primary, intermediate and secondary). Focus is given to the teaching of Qur'an sciences, interpretation and recitation in addition to *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad sayings) and general syllabi.

In 1972, the GPGE began the execution of a program for illiteracy eradication and adults' education. Five illiteracy eradication schools were opened in Riyadh, Makkah, Jeddah and Dammam. Other similar schools were opened around the Kingdom. The illiteracy rate among women in Saudi Arabia declined significantly from 87.5 percent to only 27 percent by 2003.

When the Kingdom won the UNESCO's prestigious Noma Award for literacy in 1998, it crowned GPGE's illiteracy eradication efforts. At the Arab level, these efforts were also appreciated when the Arab League Educational and Cultural Organization (ALESCO) granted the Kingdom a literacy award for the year 1998.

In addition, Saudi Arabia's educational policy has paid attention to the disabled and students with special needs by preparing certain strategies and plans designed for this category of pupils.

In 1964, the first two special education institutes for girls were established in Riyadh, one of them for the blind and the other for the deaf. The ministry of education has

been supervising this type of education for both sexes. Since 1994, supervision for girls' special education was assigned to the GPGE. Currently there are more than 25 special education institutes in Saudi Arabia.

Private education was the nucleus of education in the Kingdom. It continued to develop until the number of private schools reached more than 1,000 with 118,860 female students at different stages from kindergarten to secondary level, according to recent reports.

University Education:

There are a number of institutions that offer university education for Saudi women. The GPGE itself has several colleges that offer university education in different specializations.

One of the priorities of the GPGE was to prepare qualified female teachers. In the same year the Presidency was established, the first female teachers' intermediate institute opened in Makkah. Other similar institutes opened until the number reached 29 in 1975, at which time the opening of this kind of institute was halted. These institutes were upgraded to secondary teachers' institutes in 1975, and more new institutes opened until their number reached 168. They were later transformed either to general secondary schools or female teacher's intermediate colleges.

The GPGE aimed to establish intermediate colleges, in order to qualify female teachers to take the job of teaching at primary and intermediate stages. The number

of intermediate colleges reached 36. These colleges were later upgraded to university level educational colleges that granted bachelor degrees. The number of similar colleges exceeded 100 with more than 250,000 female students.

Saudi universities offer various specializations for Saudi women. For instance, King Saud University received the first batch of female students in 1961 as part-time students at the arts and commerce colleges. The number of female students increased until they reached 20,655, according to 1995 statistics. The number of female students at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, which was initially opened as a private university, reached 20,388 according to the statistics of the same year.

The Islamic university in Madinah, which was opened in 1961, admits female students for postgraduate studies only. The Riyadh-based Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University, opened in 1974, and by 1995 the number of female students at this university reached around 7,606.

The number of female students at King Faisal University in Ahsa and Dammam reached 7,671 in 1995, while the number reached 9,355 in the Makkah-based Um Al-Qura University.

In Taiba University in Madinah, which was once a branch of King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah and was officially opened in 2002, the number of female students reached 2,475, while in Taif University, which is a new university, the number stood at 5,227. In Qassim University, which was once a branch of King Saud University and was officially opened as university in 1994, the number of

female students is 966.

When the number of secondary school graduates began to increase the higher education institutions were unable to absorb the growing number of graduates. As a result women began to look at other professions outside the fields of education and medicine, and community colleges opened to meet their needs.

The first female community college was opened in Tabuk in the year 2000. More than 20 community colleges were later opened in different parts of the Kingdom. These colleges aim at meeting the requirements of the labor market. Duration of study at these colleges ranges from two to three years. In 2005, female students at these community colleges reached 6,882.

Health education for girls began in 1961 when the first two girls' health institutes were opened in Riyadh and Jeddah. Soon similar institutes opened in other parts of the Kingdom and today there are more than 30 of these institutes. With the major development of the health care sector in the Kingdom and the need for highly qualified cadres, the ministry of health opened a number of girl's health colleges in 1995. By 2005, the number of these colleges reached more than 20 with 2,998 students.

In addition to these institutions, Saudi women are admitted to the state-owned Institute of Public Administration (IPA). In 2005, the number of females registered at the institute reached more than 500. More than 1,355 Saudi female students are reported to be studying at private colleges in the year 2005.

Postgraduate Studies:

The PGE began postgraduate studies at the Girl's College of Education in Riyadh in 1976. By 2005, more than 4,000 Saudi female students were registered for postgraduate studies programs.

Conclusion:

As we have seen, the education of Saudi woman has passed through significant stages of developments. Despite the attention given to it, the education of Saudi women still faces a number of challenges, the most important of them are:

- Increasing population growth and greater numbers of young women who are seeking institutions of higher education.
- Few females specialize in scientific fields, where there are job vacancies in the Kingdom, while there is unemployment among females graduating with theoretical specializations.
- There is a lack of female academic and administrative cadres capable of managing the required changes needed at the present time.

Despite this, the experience of women's education in Saudi Arabia is a distinguished one and reflects the comprehensive development of Saudi woman.

The growth rate of girls' education is high. At the same time, education now enjoys a decent environment that meets a woman's objectives and ambitions. Education enables her to perform her duties and shoulder her responsibilities as daughter, wife, mother and good citizen who serves her society and takes part in the realization of the objectives of the country's development plans.

Single-Sex Education in Saudi Arabia

(Ruqaya Al-Aloola)

Introduction:

Scholars, thinkers and ordinary people agree that there are significant, instinct differences between males and females. Many social scientists and educationalists also agree that the type of education that boys and girls receive should be based on the role that each one of them will perform in society. This type of education, moreover, should match the instinctive differences between the two sexes. Thus Saudi Arabia is a unique experiment in women's education in which the two sexes are totally separated at schools and universities.

The Royal Order for establishing schools in Saudi Arabia, which was issued in 1959, has underlined the independence of girls' education. Article (155) of the Education Policy in Kingdom stipulates, "banning the mix between boys and girls at all education stages except in kindergartens and nurseries." This peculiarity has made the development of female education remarkable although it began some 35 years after the start of males' education.

Saudi families began registering their daughters at public schools in cities, villages and hamlets. The door was soon opened for girls to pursue their postgraduate studies. Statistics trace the quantitative development of government primary, intermediate and secondary schools since the first Saudi government school was opened and until the beginning of the new millennium. In 1961, for example, the number of primary schools was only 15, with 5,180 students and 113 female teachers. By 2001, the number of schools reached 5,453, with 968,969 students and 78,651 teachers.

There were only five intermediate schools in 1963, with 235 students, and the same teachers who taught in primary schools taught the older girls. In 2002, the number of schools jumped to 2,439, with 454,041 students and 36,883 female teachers.

In 1963, there was only one girls' secondary school in Saudi Arabia with 21 students and no teachers (the intermediate schools teachers were used to teach in secondary schools). In 2002, the number of girls' secondary schools reached 1,432, with 354,968 students and 26,668 teachers.

Pillars of Single-sex Education in Saudi Arabia:

The quotation referred to earlier from the education policy document, which was issued in 1970 and which bans the mixing of the two sexes at public schools, has been a necessary option and a logical approach, which is based upon three main pillars:

1- The Religious Pillar:

Islam, which is both a constitution and the system of life for Saudi Arabia, has placed men and women equal in honor. (*We have honored the sons of Adam*.) Islam also places equal human value between men and women in a fair way. It is not an absolute equality as absolute equality is not fair due to the difference in the nature and creation of each of them. Each party was assigned responsibilities and granted rights that suit him or her. Saudi Arabia's separation between the sexes in education is neither a kind of racial segregation nor a segregation that violates equity in rights and responsibilities. It certainly does not aim to grant boys better educational opportunities than girls. It is a separation that is established on a religious pillar that is based on equity.

2- Physiological and Psychological Differences Between Men and Women

There are differences related to the creation of every man and woman and the role each was prepared for. This does not at all mean a kind of racial segregation between the two sexes. These differences are the ones that made the structure of a man, and not a woman, suitable for hard manual tasks. They also made the results of male students, in general, better in physics, chemistry, mathematics, geography and arts education, while female students are excellent in languages, biology and handicrafts. This makes it logical to propose the separation of the two sexes

in physics and mathematics classes in particular.

Many studies that examined coeducation have proved that, as a result of their psychological and physical differences, teachers pay more attention to males in coed schools, boys show their knowledge of the subject they are studying, and they are the ones who often raise their voices during class.

3- The Social Pillar

Muslim society in Saudi Arabia is not alone in realizing the negative social and moral impacts of coeducation. A study conducted by a national teachers union in a Western country underlines the fact that coeducation has led to the spread of illegal pregnancies among young girls who were under the age of 16. The study also proves an increasing trend toward sexual crime rates, assaults against girls and abortion cases. The study, moreover, proves that aggressive behavior increases among girls who study in coeducational schools, which means girls were influenced by the behavior of boys.

So Saudi Arabia's policy of total separation of the two sexes, preserves girls' legal, psychological and social rights. They learn in a secured environment within a system that considers their peculiarities and takes into consideration their material, psychological and intellectual needs. This environment also helps guarantee that female employees can take their employment rights through the provision of genuine job opportunities that enable them to exercise their responsibilities and occupy leading positions.

A separate work environment in Saudi Arabia gives

women the opportunity to get all leading positions in girls' schools and the education supervision departments and at the same time share with men leading positions at the education departments. Even in the ministry headquarters, women occupy some leading jobs. They also occupy all leading positions at the girls' colleges and men are not taking part in teaching jobs at these colleges except in limited cases and via the closed TV circuit.

This means that women in the Kingdom have managed to get promotions in their field of work without competition from men. This has provided job and promotion opportunities which may not be available for women in countries that adopt a coeducational policy.

Thus the experiment of girls' education is a unique one as it is applied separately from males' education. This policy does not run contrary to educational attainment, modern day requirements or the good performance of Saudi woman, who continue to proceed to the future with every confidence.

Call for Single-sex Education in the West:

To confirm that the Saudi experiment in single-sex education is a unique one and worth following, there are voices in the West beginning to call for ending coeducation there. This is happening in the West, which, for more than half a century, has been pursuing the policy of integration between the two sexes in schools. In the United States, this policy has been in place since 1774. Many individuals and organizations in the United States have become convinced that educating girls and boys in

separate schools produces better results. The decision taken by the Bush administration for supporting single-sex public education is an indication of a clear change in the process of educational policy in the United States. Sweet Briar College in the state of Virginia is proud that it is only for women.

According to statistics published by the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE) in the United States, in its Internet website, the number of schools that provide single-sex education, since October 2007, has reached 363 schools.(1)

At the official level, a certain conviction of giving communities more flexibility in offering additional choices to parents in the education of their children began taking shape. On October 24, 2006, Margaret Spellings, the U.S. Secretary of Education announced new single-sex education regulations, which recognized that some students learn better in a single sex class or school. These new regulations amend existing regulations that implement Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibit sex discrimination in education programs or activities that receive federal funds.

Dr. Leonard Sax, executive director of NASSPE, led a two-day workshop on the subject at the campus of Stetson University in DeLand, Florida, in May 2007. Researchers at Stetson University completed a three-year pilot project comparing single-sex classrooms with coed classrooms at Woodward Avenue Elementary School, a nearby neighborhood public school. Fourth grade students

(1) www.singlesexschools.org

at Woodward were assigned either to single-sex or coed classrooms. All relevant parameters were matched: the class sizes were all the same, the demographics were the same, all teachers had the same training in what works and what doesn't work, etc. Results of the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) were astonishing. They were as follows:

> Boys in coed classes: 37 percent scored proficient
> Girls in coed classes: 59 percent scored proficient
> Girls in single-sex classes: 75 percent scored proficient
> Boys in single-sex classes: 86 percent scored proficient

Another example that shows positive results of single-sex education, even in a Western environment that calls for coeducation, is a study by a group of researchers at Cambridge University. In June 2005, researchers at Cambridge University released results of a four-year study of gender differences in education. The researchers investigated hundreds of different schools, representing a wide variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, seeking to identify strategies, which improved performance of both girls and boys while narrowing the gender gap between girls and boys. These researchers found that the single-sex classroom format was remarkably effective at boosting boys' performance particularly in English and foreign languages, as well as improving girls' performance in math and science.(1)

(1) ibid

At the same time, Christian scholars in the West have begun calling for single-sex education, highlighting its advantages compared with co-education. For instance, the Rev. C. John McCloskey presented a paper at the First Pan American Congress on Family and Education in Monterrey, Mexico, on May 23-26, 1994. He praised single-sex education and said:

"I believe that coeducation has been and continues to be a serious mistake because it generally ignores the radical differences between men and women in their biology, physiology, psychology, and in their proper roles in contemporary society and the family."(1)

He urged further objective studies of the educational system. He noted that, from a personal viewpoint, he believes coeducation should begin at the onset of puberty (which occurs increasingly early in the U.S. due to nutritional factors) and continue through early adulthood (increasingly later due to what he refers to as "arrested adolescence" in the U.S.).

He said in this context, "The sexes, therefore, should be educated separately from at least the age of 12 through high school, and serious thought should be given to single-sex education in the university."

McCloskey expects that in centuries to come coeducation will be seen as an aberrant social experiment in the twentieth century that was largely abandoned due to its documented negative effects on family, culture, and society.

(1) http://www.catholicity.com/mccloskey/singlesexedu.html

Conclusion:

The peculiarity of Saudi women's education, which is single-sex education, is a transferable experience. It is clear, well defined and easy to apply. Single-sex education has opened the doors wide for Saudi females to excel in education and work. More and more educators around the world are beginning to be convinced of the benefits of single-sex education. But others fear being accused of backwardness, violating the spirit of modern life, or promoting gender discrimination, and that has made them too shy to speak out for single-sex schools or for an education for boys and girls that consider the characteristics of each sex. This is the reality of education in Saudi Arabia.

Moral Modernity Mirage in Coeducation

(Cisse Maud)

At the same time when Western civilization is consolidating its technological successes and its political control over the contemporary world, it assumes that its materialistic advancement also means moral advancement. This was based on the grounds that during the past 150 years, Western man has been able to employ the speed factor for his interest: overcome the problem of distance, conquer space and send billions of data throughout the world by just pushing one button. But I do believe that Western morals have not succeeded in realizing similar development.

Not content to precipitate its own downfall, the West looks in disdain at other societies and would not hesitate to impose its materialistic philosophy on the whole world, nor would it hesitate to scold whoever attempts to get free from this slavery.

From this perception, it sees Islam and the Muslim world as the target, probably due to its jealousy of the exclusive loyalty Muslims hold for their religion and its

principles, in contrast to Christianity—the foundations of which were undermined by dint of laxity. The West denounces Islam, which is consistent in its faith, mission and accomplishments. The West also accuses Islam for its special religious and earthly intimacy as this represents a fortress that blocks the obscure Western attempts to intellectually and socially invade Muslims societies.

Amid these developments, Saudi Arabia falls in the forefront of targeted Islamic societies. In the West, Saudi Arabia is viewed as a center of backwardness and a country that exploits women, a foe of democracy and personal rights. The Western media reflects nasty images about other societies to confirm the conviction of its citizens that their Western civilization is the best. The West should realize that admitting the existence of these different societies is an acknowledgment of the failure of the Western model and recognition that there is a strong resistance to this model.

Despite the clarity of these facts, it is common to read and listen to what contradicts it. It is useful here to pick up one issue which is the most prominent aspect taken by the Western media as a negative attitude toward Saudi Arabia, especially its religion and values. It is the single-sex method of education applied in the Kingdom.

Effects of Co-education Propaganda:

In France, even today, when one passes by an old primary school building, it is not unusual to read over its door a signboard, sometimes covered by a new one and sometimes not covered by anything which reads: Boys

School or Girls School. Such signboards take us to a past that faded away from the daily French life. Even thinking about this past arouses the anger of many in today's world.

All are repeating the list of advantages of coeducation. "We could not imagine single-sex schools. This is something of the past. Leave boys alone and you will get harsh men with no kindness and compassion. Leave girls alone and you will get frivolous women who exhaust their energy in talks and non-ending plots. Coeducation opens the mind and removes differences between the two sexes, consolidates equity between the two sexes, encourages girls to compete with boys. Keeping boys and girls apart generates fear and disdain of the other and prevents communication between the two main parties of the society."

This trend can be seen in the Activity Report 2003 of the delegation to women's rights and equality of opportunities between men and women and the mixing of the two sexes in France. The report says:

"The progress of coeducation in schools in the 1960s and 1970s was coupled with an evolution in morals, a matter which is registered as an equality achievement between the sexes. As the mixing of the sexes is a necessary condition, it is insufficient for encouraging this equality. For this reason, co-education today gains large consensus in the French society. It is considered as a gain for most population segments and the concerned parties in schools. Questioning or accusing this kind of education would be seen as a step backward. It is strongly defended by

educational teams as both a principle of social integration and as base of national education." [1]

In this context, Antoine Prost noted that he has presented many justifications to demonstrate that coeducation is the best environment for students in classes and that teaching in mixed classes is more exiting and interesting for teachers and, for parents, it is more capable of granting "civilization blessings" for girls and boys.

If most Westerners, teachers, students and their parents support coeducation and consider the different physical features between males and females are but a social myth generated by upbringing, they have in mind that the principle of gender equality is the reason of two strange phenomena: the first one is a mixture of concept where equality is synonymous to non-distinction between girls and boys. This was seen in the current feminism phenomenon of some men in their appearance and expression of their feelings.

The other one is the exacerbation of the characteristics of each sex, because while being required to become like the other on behalf of the sacrosanct equality indiscriminately, he or she must remain oneself. This pressure is seen particularly among girls, who, from the early years of childhood, develop a kind of affection with males. As a result, they start looking for a lover at the kindergarten and an amour in secondary school. We all know the cases of very brilliant male and female students who turned stupid because of a short-lived love for which they sacrifice a bright future and a moral dignity.

(1) http://www.senat.fr/rap/r03-263/r03-263.html

Reality of Islam in the Relations Between Men and Women:

Contrary to what its opponents may allege, the Islamic *sharia* has no murderous or heartless tendency. There is nothing better able to develop a man's capabilities than this *sharia*. Women's inferiority vis-à-vis man is not mentioned in the holy Qur'an. Man was granted authority over the family and over woman in legal testimony, as women generally may not be heavily involved with or experienced in business transactions.

In worshipping, men and women are equal. They are both requested to seek knowledge.

Ensuring this harmony, God decreed the separation between the two sexes. This separation is not absolute or eternal but depends about the degree of kinship. This is because Islam wants to preserve the social system from collapsing. This system is even applied when the two sexes are still young before they reach the stage of adolescence. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said "**Order your children to pray at the age of seven, beat them [lightly] if they do not do so by the age of ten and separate them in their bedding."**

Narrated Abdullah Ibn Abass: 'Al-Fadl bin Abbas rode behind Allah's Messenger on the 10th day of the month of Dhul-Hijjah. In the meantime, a woman from the tribe of Khath'am came to ask the Prophet a question. Al-Fadl started looking at her [and] the Prophet held his hands backwards and caught the chin of Al-Fadl and turned his face (to the other side) in order that he should not gaze at her.

Al-Abbas, the Prophet's uncle asked: "Oh Prophet of Allah, I saw you turning the face of your cousin." The Prophet said: "I saw a young man and a young woman and I feared for them from Satan."

We all know that the Prophet's wives, who are respected by all Muslims, had been talking to foreigners behind screens. Contrary to the logic that prevails in the West, it is obvious that this reality that had prevailed 1,400 years ago, should be valid now due to the corruption of our morals and lack of purity in our intentions.

Education of Saudi Women

As the West is preoccupied with criticizing the Saudi social policy, they do not pay attention to the achievements the Kingdom realized in education. One could not ignore the great efforts exerted by Saudi Arabia to guarantee that both men and women in this country receive an adequate education that suits the needs of this modern time.

Since the 1960s, girls' educational institutions from primary schools to universities have opened around the country. Anthony H. Cordesman, author of *Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century*(1), said, "During the past ten years, the number of Saudi female students increased in a rate that surpassed by two and a half the number of male students."(2)

In addition to deploring separation between girls and boys, some are sad that some specializations, like

(1) "Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century"
(2) Quoted from a Study about women's education in Saudi Arabia. http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v1

engineering, mass communications and architecture are not open to female students and that women are studying only to become dentists or general practitioners, nurses or employees in administration sections.

At the same time when Saudi society gives value to education, it respects natural equilibrium in society. If a woman is to work, this work should not run contrary with her family obligations. A woman in the West, who is asked to do everything, to compete with men in work, and at the same time be an ideal mother and wife, knows this well.

So when we read "These jobs are a continuation to the role she is playing at home, we notice that these jobs culturally and religiously suit woman as they make it possible to separate the two sexes at work and allow women to work in women-only environment."[1]

The modern woman is pleased to accuse "the old woman model," a model that is inherited from the Prophet's wives and their female companions. But the question is: Among all alternatives proposed by modern women, what is the one that has succeeded in granting a degree of social stability like that which is granted by Islamic model? Let us not even talk of personal achievement of most of those who believed the mirage of the modern woman, as the triumph they were promised is but a heavy burden of multiple pressures that should be conciliated. Thus success is sometimes genuine but its price remains high.

(1) Sabbagh, Suha. (1996). Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint. New York: Olive Branch Press

Supporters of Single-sex Education:

Until the 1960s and 1970s it has been something considered natural in the West that girls and boys were not mixed. Though in the name of ‘freedom’ the notion has changed, still in some societies in the West, particularly in Britain and the United States, the number of supporters of single-sex education is growing. For instance, there are some 300 private schools in the United States that adopt single-sex education. More than that figure is in Britain and Canada.(1) There are many Internet websites that praise the separation of the two sexes in education. These sites base their support on scientific studies and they mention the benefits that single-sex education brings for both girls and boys.

A number of studies indicate that educating girls in a female-only educational environment grants them more room for participation in fields that are monopolized by males like science, mathematics and information technology. When boys are given an education in an all-male environment, they can develop their literary and art capabilities without been teased or described as womanlike as they may be in co-educational schools. In France, for instance, educators have developed awards to encourage scientific leaning among girls.

In addition to study performance improvement, single-sex education helps develop positive attitudes. Girls exhibit greater confidence and actively take part in classes. Aggression among boys declines and they become

(1) http://privateschool.about.com/cs/choosingaschool/a/singlesex.htlm

more cooperative because pressure, implicit or explicit, usually posed by the opposite sex in a mixed environment disappeared.

There are contradicting viewpoints on this issue. Some may say that the good performance of schools that adopt single-sex education is not definite and that the student's samples are not always ideal, and are not free of discrimination between the two sexes and they took other forms.[1]

This aspect is not important, as Islam did not wait for the development of "difficult" sciences or human sciences to prove the validity of its doctrine. Muslims believe that as the *sharia* is from God, this is a sufficient guarantee for its idealism and preference over any other legislation in the past or future. God says in the holy Qur'an: "*It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger to have any option about their decision: if any one disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path*." (33:36)

The benefits cited by Western experts in psychology, education and sociology confirm this fact and prove the ill intentions of the West when criticizing the Islamic model not because this model has clear defects, but for the mere enjoyment of wiping out a rival. But as Muslims we cannot remain insensitive to the eminent real threat on the community's Islamic system.

Threats Facing Values:

Probably the nature of the Saudi society in general

(1) http://www.senat.fr/rap/r03263-/r0326316-.htlm

resists strong attacks that it faces on a continuing basis, but there is some weakness in some situations. When visiting Saudi Arabia or Arab countries one is surprised to see the spread of Western dreams and the success the West has made in gaining the hearts of many people. The Western way of life, including fashions, are encouraged by satellite channels that work to undermine the stability of family life away from the monitoring of society.

In the face of this seduction, which many *ulema* (Muslim scholars) condemn in their sermons, it is important to strengthen protection through solid moral education for people who should fully abide by Islamic principles not through imitation and weakness but through conviction and confidence. When one does not understand the values or benefits of law and thinks that it is imposed upon him by force, he will find difficulty in obeying it and will try to disobey it.

Youths are quickly influenced by these messages, particularly if the main objective of TV satellite channels is to overspread them with seductions and romantic songs. As a result these youths are tempted to circumvent the system to have access to prohibited enjoyments by ways that violate the law.

Western media believe that their campaign has succeeded. On Valentine Eve this media said Saudis invest in different ways to avoid the punishment of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.[1] And in a country that bans coeducation in schools,

(1) http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6964340/

youths have invented means to meet and communicate through mobile telephones and the Internet.

Although such matters seem trivial, and the percentages of those who abuse these customs remain obscure they are worrisome in that they can corrupt the whole society.

Serious attention should be given to this and Muslims should be encouraged to follow the following *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad saying):

"Ahead of you are days which will require endurance (in the practice of religion), in which he who shows endurance will be like him who grasps live coals. The one who acts rightly during that period will have the reward of fifty men who act as he does." The hearers said, "The reward of fifty of them or of us, Messenger of Allah!" He replied, "The reward of fifty of you."

Another point should be noticed, if Islam has been able to preserve its purity over the centuries, it is because it is a comprehensive religion that covers all life aspects, as well as all that relates to man's soul and body. Islam does not at all reject the rights of body as did the spiritual perception of man which was spread by Christianity through the imposition of excessive restrictions like that of priests who should remain single and celibate. The reaction to this perception has led to the sudden spread of immorality, which is being viewed as a liberty from religious taboos.

At a time when Islam grants value to modesty and considers it as a branch of faith, it rejects false modesty when it comes to knowledge of *sharia.* Islam considers legal relations as a factor of happiness. It is important to

introduce sex education according to Islamic concepts and not according to the degraded concepts of the term applied in educating girls and boys who may find themselves compelled to look for answers of lawful questions that were mentioned in the Western books and media in an immoral approach not as an educational means.

Going forward in self-pride and prosperity, within the respect of sacred Islamic instructions, is the brave choice of Saudi Arabia for building its educational system despite the voices, whether outside or inside the Kingdom, of those calling for "modernization." These voices want to have the whole world embrace a religion whose god is dissolution.

Surrounded by a West which is full of animosity and an Arab and Muslim world which lives in bewilderment, Saudi Arabia proves that it is not without reason that it was selected to be the haven and custodian for the two holy mosques, and that in the blood of its people run the noble values that served as banners to their ancestors.

It is up to those who treat evil as evil and good as good to denounce a trend that has been absorbed by some whose soul has been destroyed by the whims of lustiness. They have the option to keep silent about the moral destruction and social problems afflicting the alleged success of the Western model. At the same time, crime, delinquency and other deviant behavior remain rare in the Saudi society, which they claim is dying due to its cultural stagnancy.

What is the benefit of proudly speaking about innovations that are after all, a source of social chaos? What is the benefit of distorting the traditional order of

human relations at a time when this would only lead to the most miserable and brutal directions?

Anyone who claims to substitute the divine I with his weak ideology would only end in total failure. In its futile gestures and in its ridiculous ambitions for progress and absolute truth, the West is actually translating the following verses of the holy Qur'an revealed more than 14 centuries ago:

Say: "*Shall we tell you of those who lose most in respect of their deeds? Those whose efforts have been wasted in this life, while they thought that they were acquiring good by their works? They are those who deny the Signs of their Lord and the fact of their having to meet Him (in the Hereafter): vain will be their works, nor shall We, on the Day of Judgment, give them any weight." (18:103-105).*

Saudi Women and the Labor Market

(Huda Al-Jeraisy)

Introduction:

Saudi women contribute into the production process in both public and private sectors. Their contribution to the national economy is remarkable; women are considered to be half the workforce. As the increase of women's contributions to the national economy raises the economic growth rate, it then increases job opportunities.

The Saudi government has facilitated the participation of women in both the public and private labor markets. As a result, the role of women has developed significantly during the past three decades. Women's job opportunities in the private sector have increased accordingly.

What helps in the success of Saudi women in the labor market is that the Islamic *sharia* grants women equal civil and business rights to men and gives women independent financial status from her guardians. There is no condition for practicing this qualification but to abide by moral values and there is no difference between men and women

in this matter. Women in Islam have the right to enter into the different processes of selling, authorization, money transfer, entering into partnerships and endowment. The contracts she concludes are valid and are not subject to the approval of any male individual, including a father, a brother or a husband.

Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, was one of the most important merchants of her time. She was a businesswoman and the Prophet himself was in charge of her trade.

The holy Qur'an encourages people to work within certain conditions that do not differentiate between men and women. One of the most important of these conditions is that women and men who are not legal guardians are not to mix with each other. Prophet Muhammad said, "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him not be alone with a woman who has no *mahram* (legal guardian) present, for the third one present will be the Satan."

Saudi women are working in different fields that suit their status. They contribute in agriculture and food industry in rural areas and engage in some professions like tailoring. They have worked in marketing others' products particularly in rural areas and small cities. With the development of communications, women have the opportunity to run their businesses without directly entering the labor market. A woman can communicate with others, offer services and conclude deals and contracts via modern communications. Probably, women most benefit from e-commerce as they can sell and buy via the Internet and exchange information with others without a need to go outside their home.

Saudi Women in the Public Sector:

The huge government spending on women's education and qualification programs, which aim to help women to contribute in the consecutive development plans, has led to the rise of the standard of women's education as well as the improvement of the health and social standards of women. Females working in the government sector increased to 37 percent of the work force in 2003 according to figures released by the General Statistics Department.

A study reveals that the number of women working in the public sector has grown remarkably, particularly in the education sector. Official statistics estimated the number of Saudi women working in education jobs to be some 180,122 or 84 percent of the total Saudi women working in the public sector. The number of Saudi women on temporary contracts at the education sector amounted to 57,818, while the percentage of Saudi females working in the health and social fields is not more than 7.5 percent. The remaining women are working in other government jobs, including teaching at universities.

Saudi Women in the Private Sector:

Saudi women's contributions in the private sector, whether in the jobs or in investment in productive projects, is still below the ambitions outlined by the Kingdom's development plans, despite the remarkable increase of women's participation in this field in the past few years. For instance, the number of women members of the Chambers of Commerce was only 2,398 in 2003. This figure represents only 8 percent of the total members of

the Chambers of Commerce, which totals 40,870.

Women's investments are limited to small and medium scale projects. The study noted that one of the important reasons for the failure of the private sector to attract women is the lack of training and qualifications necessary to join this sector.

Banks and private training institutes are the most sectors that employ Saudi women, despite the fact that women employees constitute only 4 percent of the total banks' employees. Saudi Aramco employs 1,000 Saudi women. In short, the number of Saudi women working in the private sector is still very small and does not exceed 11,142 or 0.68 percent of the total workforce in this sector.

As for women's participation in commercial projects, a study noted that the total number of commercial registrations with women's names amounted to 31,299 or 4.7 percent of the number of companies registered at the Chambers of Commerce in the Kingdom. The same study pointed out that deposits in women's accounts at ladies' commercial bank branches amounted to more than 6,970.6 million Saudi riyals, according to statistics compiled in December 2002, compared to 5,455 million Saudi riyals in December 2001. This reveals that there are huge inactive women's deposits and that if women enter in the investment field it will be of great benefit to the economy.

The study confirms the conclusions of previous studies saying that there are many obstacles and difficulties facing Saudi women investors. The study, however, draws attention to the fact that since 2003 there is a serious

trend for increasing women's participation in economic activities. The removal of obstacles that face women will encourage them to be involved in different investment fields and to positively take part in economic and social development.

In this context, the government issued consecutive decisions, the most famous of which is the cabinet decision No 120, issued in 2005, which is related to women's work. The nine-item decision aims to facilitate the procedures required from businesswomen for setting up new projects and the creation of women's jobs in the private sector. The decision, moreover, calls for the activation of women's distance business.

Saudi women have entered different economic, commercial and industrial fields and set up many establishments involving various businesses like education, training, tailoring, cosmetics and skin care, health care, imports and exports, advertising and publicity, media, décor engineering, and many others. In all these fields, Saudi women have proven their capabilities despite having a separate work environment.

Saudi women have also invested in industry. Women own at least 74 factories in the Kingdom and there are women who are partners in different factories producing food products, textiles, ready-made clothes, furniture, tents, leather, curtains, paints, chemical products and others.

The stock market is another sector that Saudi women have not hesitated to enter and they have found that this sector is a good field for investment. Saudi women entered

this sector as investors and speculators.

The shares sector suits a woman who does not want to go outside her home. From home she can follow up portfolios and trade shares on a daily and weekly basis. A large number of Saudi women prefer to deal directly in stocks and then in investment funds through trading agents at bank halls. They also use the phone and the Internet to trade shares. According to estimates released by the Saudi Capital Market Authority (CMA), women's portfolios in local banks were estimated to be at least 300,000.

Saudi Women and Voluntary Work:

In another vital field, the study draws attention to the increasing number of Saudi women engaged in voluntary works. By the end of the sixth Development Plan (1995-2000), members of charitable societies in Saudi Arabia reached 27,500, and about 9.2 percent, or 2,505 of them are women's.

Charitable societies play a prominent role in the production and marketing of women's businesses. These societies work to enhance women's capabilities and launch initiatives for solving social problems like the qualification and training of girls with special needs. The societies, among other things, work for the preservation of traditions and help families establish small-scale projects by offering financial aid.

Conclusion: Exploring the Future

In order to increase women's participation in the labor

market, it is necessary to give attention to education and training outputs. This will be made by having the business sector adopt special training and qualification programs for female college students and graduates depending upon the needs of the private sector. There is a need to address the problem of a large number of female university students going into humanity fields and theoretical specializations. This leads to a decrease in the number of female graduates in applied and technical fields. For instance, the number of Saudi females in the health sector is not more than 20 percent of the total workforce in this sector. There must be more of an effort to encourage female students to join health specializations.

The study, moreover, recommends the importance of serious work to improve the productivity of the Saudi national workforce, removal of obstacles facing the nationalization of jobs in both public and private sectors, and the adoption of incentive policies in the labor market.

It should be mentioned that all studies that cover Saudi working women were influenced by the concept that only women on the payroll are considered working women. This notion excludes housewives, who do not receive wages in return for the work they do, while the work concept is more comprehensive than this definition, and it covers all individuals who provide manpower in various work fields.

No doubt, women work at home and the upbringing of children is an important job that has a direct impact on the social and economic future of the labor market.

Some researchers suggest that women's activities at home should be calculated as economic activities and that revenue should be included as part of the gross domestic product (GDP). They underlined that the activities a woman performs at home are economic ones, classified in the labor market. They added that she prepares human cadres for any development process. Here appears the importance of creating a balance between benefiting from a woman's participation in social development and her work at home with her family.

Saudi women have succeeded in entering different fields and work places without affecting their social, cultural and religious fundamentals, thanks to God and the application of Islamic *sharia* in our country, which guarantees man a noble living and happy life.

Saudi Women: A Japanese Perspective

Namie Tsujigami

Introduction

Throughout my research trips to Saudi Arabia in 2005 and 2007, I continuously encountered the question on why I am studying Saudi women. I myself do not know the right answer for this question and this is what I am searching for throughout my study life. Yet the answer I tentatively give them is that I would like to take advantage of residing in the Kingdom for two years as a contract based cultural and political attaché and as the first female staff at the Japanese Embassy in Riyadh between 2000 and 2002. I also felt a sense of mission to be involved in a work somehow related to Saudi society even after leaving the diplomatic services.

Probably like other scholars, my intellectual interest was triggered by the unique gender norms of Saudi Arabia: veiling practices that sometimes require covering faces, the ban on women's driving, sex segregation in the public spheres and so forth. However, in the course

of my study, I came to doubt the "peculiarity" of the gender order in Saudi Arabia as will be argued here. My perspective on Saudi women may or may not represent Japanese perspectives on Saudi women. Yet my inquiry on Saudi gender order is based on my identity with which I struggled in the course of my study life.(1)

I will briefly review the Saudi-Japan relationship, examine the misconceptions on both sides, discuss some primary gender issues in Japan and present my view on Saudi women based on my interviews with both Saudi women and men.

1. Orientals' Orientalism: Mutual Misconceptions

Japan's relationship with the Middle East has long been limited to the economic field. Particularly, its relationship concentrated on the Gulf region from which 89 percent of the total crude oil import comes. Saudi Arabia alone provides 30 percent of Japan's oil, 24 percent comes from United Arab Emirates, 14 percent from Iran, 10 percent from Qatar, 8 percent from Kuwait, 3 percent from Oman and another 3 percent comes from Indonesia.(2)

By the same token, for Saudi Arabia Japan has been one of the best trade partners. According to Saudi Central Department of Statistics, Japan became the top importer to Saudi Arabia in 2005; exports from Japan to Saudi Arabia amounted to 105,580 million Saudi riyals, which slightly exceed the amount imported from the United

(1) With regard to the definition of gender order, see the following book. Connell, Robert. 1987. Gender and Power: Society, The Person and Sexual Politics. Stanford University Press.
(2) Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005.

States, 104,746 million Saudi riyals. In terms of import, Japan is the second largest partner to the Saudi Arabia in 2005, which amounted to 20,093 million Saudi riyals.[1]

In spite of the strong economic and energy relationship between Saudi Arabia and Japan, both of us severely lack understanding on social and cultural matters. Prof. Edward Said critically pointed out the western perspectives on the Orient in his renowned book, *Orientalism*. Japanese, though being a part of Orient, has mentally drifted over boundaries between Orient and Occident when we deal with the Arabs. In my view, the way we look at the Arabs is ironically similar to the Westerners. We tend to associate the Arabs with "its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness"[2] just like that of Western counterparts.

However, it should be noted that the power relationships are critically different. Edward Said considers Orientalism and Occidentalism as two historical processes with very different power relationships. Yet unlike the West, our "Orientalism" does not necessarily embrace constitutive will-to-power over it. For a long period of time, Japan has lacked—and still lacks—independent diplomatic policies towards the Middle East. Less committed to the Middle East, we simply lack information and knowledge about the region.

Ignorance and lack of commitment are not necessarily because of our laziness; we rather face real obstacles to obtain information from the region. Saudi Arabia was, and

---

(1) Central department of Statistics. http://www.cds.gov.sa/statistic/sindexe.htm Accessed on 7 April, 2007

(2) Said, Edward W. 1978. Orientalism New York: Vintage Books, p. 72

still is, a destination difficult to reach. For us, Saudi Arabia has been "closed," at least for a long period of time, for two reasons. First, it has not been easy for foreigners to obtain a visa that always requires a sponsorship for us. Even in this globalized era, we are required to satisfy the same procedure as before. As a proof, a weekly Saudia flight between Osaka and Riyadh (via Manila), which launched after the visit of the Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz in April 2006, had to be suspended shortly after the inauguration.

Another reason is related to gender norms specific to Saudi Arabia. Most of the few Japanese researchers who specialize in Saudi politics, economics and Islamic studies were men, thus they could not reach at least half of the society, i.e., women. I encountered some male Japanese researchers' complaints that they have never had a chance to see Saudi women throughout their stay in the Kingdom, subsequently they remain ignorant on women's issues.

The fact that we did not have sufficient opportunities to obtain our own data only increased the stereotypes. According to the data I personally gathered, ordinary Japanese only know about oil fields and deserts in Saudi Arabia. The older generation tends to think of the heroic chronicles of the desert because of the image of Lawrence of Arabia. Or, Japanese in general sometimes imagine the vast majority of the Saudi population as extraordinary rich because of its oil production. That is no way the truth when taking into account the GDP per capita of the two states (GDP per capita in Japan is $33,100 (2006 est.) whereas

that of Saudi Arabia is $13,800).[1]

The Japanese have a general image of Saudi women experiencing oppression and subjugation. When I introduce myself, and my studies, I often come across sympathetic Japanese women who believe that the Saudi women are second-class citizens. Their compassion reaches a peak when it comes to the fact that Saudi women go out all in black. At the same time, not a few Japanese men are jealous of Saudi men because they can marry up to four wives!

However, it should be noted that generalizations are not unique to Japanese. Images of Japan among the Saudis are often limited to manufacturers such as Toyota and Sony, although younger generations are normally more familiar with a part of Japanese culture through cartoons and TV dramas. With regard to women's issues, I receive comments in the course of my interviews that the Japanese women are obedient to their husband. Those who have this image often refer to "Oshin," a Japanese TV drama aired throughout the world. This popular TV program depicts a Japanese woman's life in the early 20th century that requires a severe tolerance. Evidently our life styles and social settings have changed and the miserable life of "Oshin" does not necessarily represent lives of most Japanese women in the contemporary society.

This is how we dramatize "the distance and difference between what is closed to it and what is far away"[2] and subsequently create stereotypical representations. Both of

(1) CIA World FactBook. https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html Accessed on 8 April, 2007
(2) Said, p. 55

us are guilty for being ignorant and forging misconceptions about “the other.” Nevertheless, it is no doubt that both sides have begun to show growing interest. In the aftermath of September 11, Middle Eastern states have gained increasing attention among the Japanese.

Politics, Islam and the region’s culture attract great interest. More and more Japanese celebrities from the political and business world began to visit Saudi Arabia in the last few years. At the same time, in the course of my interviews in Saudi Arabia I received positive impressions toward Japanese for their achievements in the economic and technological fields and for their unique culture and traditions. It is high time for both of us to put an end to the ignorance, unpack misconceptions and move beyond distancing each other.

2. **Construction of Gender Order in Japan: A Brief Review**

Interviews with Saudis enticed me to (intentionally) dislocate, problematize, and struggle with my identity. I came to conceptualise my identity based on my stay overseas: I spent more than two years in Saudi Arabia and a year in England during which I earned my second master’s degree. Living and visiting overseas stimulated me to compare the women’s role and her status within the society, social relationships between men and women, the women’s role in the family, and the family construction itself. Although I did not have opportunities to conduct scientific research, I became convinced of the similarities

that Saudi society and Japanese society share, after spending considerable time with Saudis, English and Japanese.

In order to illustrate the background of my perception, I would like briefly to review and examine women's status in Japan. According to Human Development Report 2006, Japan ranks at seventh in the Human Development Index, which is calculated with the indexes of GDP per capita, life expectancy and education.(1) Despite the high evaluation in the human development index, women's participation in the economic and political field relatively lags behind. Japan ranks 42nd in a Gender Empowerment Measure, that takes accounts of women's economic and political participation. This retrograde makes sense when the specific data is examined; Japanese women occupy only 0.1 percent of ministerial levels including deputy minister; seats in the Lower House (Shugiin) held by women count only one percent of total seats and, in the Upper House (Sangiinn), count fourteen percent. When compared with other countries with similar HDI ranks, this data shows a significant backwardness. Although the statistical calculation cannot tell everything about women's lives and status, it is indicated that Japanese women's situation lags far behind the other developed countries when it comes to economic and political participation.

An interesting phenomenon took place to cause this backwardness in the 1990s. Despite the fact that the Equal Employment Act was enacted in 1984, women were the

(1) Human Development Report 2006 http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/pdfs/report/HDR06-complete.pdf Accessed on 7 April, 2007

first victims to sustain damage from the economic recession in the 1990s. Female job seekers suffered from scarcity of employment in what was called as "Glacial Age" for job seekers. At that time, Japanese women detected the heavy burden of juggling work and family and ceased to cope with the double burden of work and home. Working women stayed single while others who wanted to have babies were disappointed after scrambling for a reliable partner.

According to the Human Development Report 2006, 48.5 percent of the female population above the age of 15 were involved in economic activities. Yet the rate of senior officials or professional employees remains low. The sexual division of labor is prevalent in the society. Despite this, feminist activities are far from active.

3. Beyond "Orientalism": A Japanese Perspective on Saudi Women

The deadlock of positivism posed questions on the notion of objectivity. Reflexivity is unavoidable since no one is free from his/her value systems and the social settings that surround him/her. My perception on Saudi women apparently reflects the ascribed identity as a Japanese woman.

It is not an easy task to map out the Saudi women's status with simple concepts. Newspaper articles on gender issues often make us confused: an article talks about a woman who obtained an international award, yet another article in the same paper discusses a disastrous case of domestic violence. The juxtaposition of both positive and negative

aspects of "Saudi women" leads us to question what are the real situations surrounding Saudi women and how to grasp the gender order. Another question we probably should (re) think is that if there is a "typical" Saudi woman.

In my view, Saudi women cannot be configured either within the concept of oppression or empowerment. Nevertheless, visibly, more and more Saudi women are working outside the home, which I am convinced of from my experiences. Every time I visit the Kingdom, I see more distinguished women in professional posts who are extraordinary energetic and decisive. More ministries and government agencies have established offices exclusively for women in the past few years. Some statistical data convince us of growth. More than 3,000 women are involved in business throughout the kingdom(1), and female economic activity rate in 2004 increased 1.16 times that of 1990.(2)

King Abdullah's succession to the throne boosted women's activities in the public sphere. Women from different fields with different interests began to demand women's rights through official and/or unofficial avenues. Yet what is noteworthy is that Westernization in terms of gender norms is not their goal. It is an intriguing phenomenon in view of the fact that Westernization takes place everywhere throughout the Kingdom.

You can watch more than 400 satellite channels, quite a few channels out of which are European- or United States-owned channels. More than 2.5 million people

(1) Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry http://www.riyadhchamber.com/cdisplay.php?cid=300 Accessed on 12 April, 2007
(2) Human Development Report 2006

have access to the Internet; that means one out of every ten people have access to the Internet in the Kingdom. Many youngsters spend more than a couple of hours a day either in front of the TV or the computer. You'll find U.S.-owned companies throughout the cities in the Kingdom; you'll never pass the main streets without finding McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Starbucks. However, many Saudis are against Westernization of gender order.

Rather than demanding equality between men and women, the majority tend to emphasize the difference between men and women. Subsequently they claim different roles for different sexes. They oppose freedom in the context of the West. Even Western educated so-called liberals often oppose the freedom of mixing of both sexes. They are more concerned with increasing the awareness of women's rights stipulated in *Shari'a* and preserving religious teachings and their own culture.

The driving licence issue is a good example to understand the Saudi belief system on gender order. Interestingly, it does not constitute a symbol of freedom of movement in a highly motorized society. Saudi Arabia is an exceptionally motorized society not only because it does not have sufficient public transportation but also because it does not provide sufficient pedestrian's paths, thus we sometimes need a car just to cross a street that is only 30 meters wide.

However, there is a consensus among women that the driving licence is not the priority. Some feel as if they are treated like a princess having their own chauffeur

whilst others are afraid of being harassed by male juvenile delinquents hanging around the city. It should be noted that those who referred to the absence of a driving licence as the most serious problem in Saudi society were the minority. In Saudi Arabia driving is a menial job done by unskilled foreign expatriates. Perhaps because of this reality, obtaining a driving licence does not necessarily mean women's empowerment. Driving is a symbol of slavery rather than an avenue for freedom of movement. Therefore, many of even the Western educated women regarded the driving license question as a lower priority. It is not only because of the fact that they can hire a driver for a petty sum of money, but it is a strategy.

A Saudi businesswoman referred to her American female friend who complained of taking her children to and from school everyday in the States. Another lady who actively claims women's rights told me she does not want to end up being a driver. Deprived of a driving license, she can allocate more time for herself than for her family. Though paradoxical, there is a certain logic behind their opinion.

Opinions on the guardian issue, may it be *mahram*, *wali amr* or *qiwāma*, are divided into three types: oppositionists, advocates and those in between. Those who oppose guardians are mainly composed of Western-educated women who believe in women's freedom of movement. They are against it because Saudi's guardian system prevents women from deciding and doing anything by themselves. They demand rights as independent individuals.

However, others defend the positive points of having

male guardians. Not a few women, including the liberal-minded, consider the guardians as supportive agents rather than controlling ones and seem to enjoy male company when they go out. A highly educated lady I interviewed positively accepts it saying, “Let them (men) do the dirty work.” In general, women like this lady gain sufficient support from their own male family members and regard a male guardian as a supporter rather than as an obstacle.

These women’s opinions represent how the gender order permeates the society and is incorporated as a device so that individuals (both men and women) practice and reproduce the gender order regardless of their awareness of sexual rules. Saudi women’s attitudes toward the driving license and guardian system are a reflection of a set of trade-offs between women’s autonomy and men’s responsibility. Saudi women strategically enjoy fewer responsibilities and avoid troublesome burdens.

4. Conclusion

It is true that cultural relativism involves specific epistemological claims, but at least it holds validity as long as it makes us (re)acknowledge the importance of moving beyond ethnocentric perspectives and understanding the heterogeneity of the value systems specific to each culture.

From a comparative perspective, Saudi women and Japanese women appear to share a small but important wisdom from our own experiences; the quest for women’s “empowerment” in the context of the West does not necessarily constitute a strategy for both Saudi and Japanese

women. Although my insight presented here is not a comprehensive examination on women in Saudi Arabia and in Japan, there is a shared tendency that women from both nations are not necessarily seeking the Western concept of women's empowerment; in Saudi Arabia women may seek bargaining powers within the patriarchy and in Japan many women are disappointed as they carry the double burden of home and work. However, it does not mean that both women reluctantly will give up fighting for the betterment of their lives. In contrast, they are resorting to an alternative strategy that fits their unique societies.

An Overview of the Economic Reality of Saudi Women

(Caroline Montagu)

Introduction:

The achievements of Saudi women over the last 20 years are quite remarkable. Saudi women have moved the goal posts in the Kingdom and continue fighting for their rights. They are professional, clever, energetic, compassionate and Muslim. They will not tolerate the role that custom has cast for them. They are well educated and committed; they work long days as professionals, serving their country, region and family.

Saudi women do not need foreigners to write for them or about them. For any foreigner it is a humbling process to write about women as courageous and determined as they, people who have studied the well-embedded cultural norms of their society and deliberately put them aside. Perhaps foreigners can provide a narrative of their achievements or, better still, present their position to a world that mostly still does not believe that Saudi women are powerful, well educated and leading government

reform. The Saudi government also wants to harness all the country's skills and use all available expertise to compete as an industrializing developing country.

At the 2007 Davos Economic Forum in Switzerland, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates described a speech he'd given in Jeddah in 2005: "If you are not utilizing half the talent in the country you're not going to get close to the top 10 [competitive economies] by 2010," he said. Such are the dynamics towards reform: the Saudi government's drive towards economic growth that runs in consistence with the Saudi women's own unstoppable reform agenda.

Foreign observers need to recognize that Saudi Arabia's population is probably 70 percent conservative and that this conservative majority includes many educated women. For instance a conference representing the conservative majority took place in Riyadh in June 2006. Women suggested that it was a sin for men and women to mix, that Saudi Arabia was the closest thing to an ideal and pure Islamic nation, and that Saudi women did not want imported Western values to sully their culture.

Saudi Arabia is determined to bring women into the mainstream of economic and social activity. A March 2007 seminar in Jeddah entitled, "The Reality of Women's Participation in National Development," backed by Princess Adilah bint Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz and sponsored by the Khadija bint Khuwailid Center for Businesswomen in the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce & Industry (JCCI), examined women's empowerment and their role in the national economy. Princess Adilah's keynote speech emphasized the need for women's empowerment, warning

the country will never develop without using the talents of *all* the Saudis; 121,000 Saudi girls leave secondary school every year and 44,000 leave universities; women invest SR42 billion in the market and have bank savings in excess of SR100 billion. The conference called for women to join the mainstream as businesswomen, decision makers, and educated self-respecting members of society.

Such views came as no surprise from Princess Adilah, the daughter of King Abdullah who in 2005, when he was Crown Prince, formed a nine-point plan for women's development. Women outperform men in the arts and sciences; they contribute to GDP through their deposits and savings, but add little to GDP through their work, as estimates suggest only 5 to 10 percent of college-educated women are employed. The high level of their investments and their role as sleeping partners in businesses in fact mask considerable unemployment.

Models and Voices

Empowerment covers more than employment. It encourages self-respect, self-confidence and the social acceptance of women as individuals in society. Women still need to feel confidant and they should not continuously feel they must prove themselves. Empowerment comes in many shapes: It is empowering for women to come from other Middle East North Africa (MENA) states to talk in the Kingdom. In the Jeddah conference, Professor Souad al-Hakeem from Lebanon University's Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences demanded that incorrect interpretations of *Shari'ah* should not stand in the way of Muslim women

taking their proper role in the world. Dr. Farida Banany, professor of higher education in the Faculty of Law, from Morocco, highlighted the need to distinguish between tradition and *Shari'a* and said women should demand their God-given rights.

A recent addition to the debate on empowerment has been *Saudi Women Speak*, a new book of interviews with prominent Saudi women, published in 2006 in Lebanon and written by Mona Almunajjed, who works for United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (UNESCWA). Among the people interviewed are Al Jawhara Al-Angari, the late Princess Iffet, Princess Norah bint Muhammad bin Saud, Norah Al Al-Shaikh, Maha Al-Juffali, Dr. Monira bint Abdul Rahman, Hoda el Khateeb and many others. They are role models in many fields: specialists in medicine (cardiology and radiology), business, painting, decorative arts design, philanthropy and NGOs, sociology and anthropology, family therapy, journalism, management, education and government social affairs.

Most of the women in Almunajjed's book come from elite or royal backgrounds. This is hardly surprising as it is elites who spearhead evolving social revolution. These women are affluent, and most have been educated abroad. They are aware of the deep problems for women and the friction in perception between the secular West and Saudi Arabia. They are concerned that Saudi women should not follow the West but develop their society according to Islam and its instructions.

Asked what they would say to other women, their advice

is: learn Islam, get a good education, be true to yourself, help others or your country, be independent, believe in yourself, show respect to all, be conscious of your role in society, show Western women that Saudi women have a history and a rich culture (Al Jawhara Al-Angari). "Saudi women should work towards a healthy society and build a healthy generation for the 21st century. Our path for social development still stretches very far ahead of us…" says Princess Norah bint Muhammad bin Saud bin Abdul Aziz. "Set a goal in your life and try to reach it," says Maha al-Juffali; "Every Saudi woman's first priority should be to serve her country," says Princess Adilah bint Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz.

At the March 2007 Jeddah conference, Lubna Al-Olayan, CEO of Olayan Financial Services, a board member of Saudi Hollandi Bank who is rated the 97th most powerful businesswoman by Forbes, called for action not words. She noted that, "It's time that we stopped talking and started working to educate and train our Saudi sisters and daughters while preserving our Islamic identity."

In one of her articles Saudi radio journalist Samar Fatany urged Saudi women to understand Islamic *sharia* because gender equality and equal rights are enshrined in the *sharia*. The precepts of Islam contrasted with the *jahiliyyah* (Pre-Islam's era), giving women many rights denied under the pre-Islamic regimes. Men and women have spiritual and human rights and duties to an equal degree, she added.

According to Almunajjed, "The Qur'an proclaimed a basic and fundamental equality between men and women,

by giving women equal rights with men (not necessarily identical), be they personal, civil, social or political rights.” Education and learning was an equal right for both sexes; women had economic independence; marriage was a civil contract according to religious precepts. It is neither Islamic laws nor *sharia* that prevent women’s emancipation; it is tradition and cultural additions.

At the Jeddah conference referred to earlier, Souad al-Hakeem commented, “We have to stop accusing Islam of holding women back and saying it is blocking the way for achieving an international role model. Women are partners of men in life and in destiny and the Muslim woman in particular is the man’s partner in everything.” For instance the Prophet consulted his wives on matters that concerned the new community and after his death the Companions consulted his widow Ayesha on religious and social issues.

Reform Programs

King Abdullah’s reform program formally put women at the center of the reform process. Women’s rights are seen as a major plank in the total reform process. The rise in the number of women graduates has been one of the drivers to integrate women into the economy and open up the private sector market to them.

The other reason has been the high level of their banking deposits and financial assets. The government plans to assist women get jobs in all fields. The government has instructed ministries and government departments and agencies to create jobs and departments for women. It has

asked the Chambers of Commerce to ensure appropriate training and to secure jobs in private business as well as allocating land for an all-women industrial zone.

Elections have been allowed to the boards of two Chambers of Commerce, in Jeddah where two women were elected, Lama al-Suleyman and Nashwa Taher, and in the Eastern Province where women were not successful. Women were not allowed to stand or vote in the 2005 municipal elections.

However, Saudi women are sanguine: "Equal opportunities and the empowerment of women will happen. There is no way out of it. We are just like any other society; like any other women that have to struggle for change. This change will inevitably be driven by economic necessity," stressed one businesswoman. The businesswomen's consensus is that change will be gradual, although economic and demographic necessity could speed up government reform.

Women in the Voluntary Field

The voluntary sector has been a key arena for women's empowerment and helped them become more visible. Women's NGOs are on the whole sophisticated and well managed. Women's NGOs are "scientific, considered sustainable development and are systematic." They have fronted campaigns on family violence, violence against children, child abuse, hereditary diseases and others.

The voluntary sector is fostering women's roles in decision-making and responsibility. One path is through the development of associations, which are frequently

instigated by the government, like the National Dialogue Center, the Saudi Association of Human Rights or the Saudi Journalists Association. Other associations have also been set up under the universities — which makes them quasi-state: professional associations, such as those for management, economics and literature. Recently women set up their branches of these professional associations and of the traditional charities. Other mixed associations are set up independently, which, provided they do not have an overtly political agenda, meet regularly, like a journalists' group in Jeddah.

In the past 30 or so years Saudi women have become partners in family businesses, kept high levels of bank deposits and invested in the stock exchange. The economic power of women in the Kingdom should not be understated. They probably own 10 percent of all real estate, especially in cities such as Jeddah and Riyadh and 30 percent of the brokerage accounts in the country. They own some 40 percent of family-run companies and, as a whole, women own estimated cash funds of SR45 billion, of which three quarters are sitting in banks as liquid deposits.

Legend of Arabia

(Tanya C. Hsu)

Independent Choice:

Legend has it that Saudi Arabian women are oppressed, passive and under the strict control of the male elite. Having moved to Riyadh independently, living life as a Saudi woman, I truthfully marvel at how inaccurate the standard Western thinking about these women continues to be, and almost cherish knowing the secret truth: that Saudi women are the strongest and toughest women I know.

As an English woman born and bred during the "Swinging '60s" of London, going to college in the days of '70's rock and roll, I have willingly opted to make the Kingdom my home. I did not move to Riyadh because I had suddenly realised that the corrupt lifestyles of much of the Western world had pervaded my near reality and I was thus seeking its opposite; I did not move to Saudi Arabia because I had converted to Islam. Neither did I come here because, like most ex-pats, I saw the opportunity to make a lot of cash, or my bank account to be well lined, or to

hold out my tin cup, or take the money and run. I do not live in a foreign compound; I have almost no non-Saudi friends; and I have an apartment in downtown Riyadh.

To the shock of virtually all I know in America and Europe (less so the latter), I surely must have been brainwashed, bribed, or paid by the Saudi royals. Were any of this true it would make for a marvellous book. No, it was the charity, honesty, hospitality and generosity of spirit that was important to me, and in Saudi Arabia it is more pervasive than in any place I have ever been to in the world.

Simply, the truth is that I found home. I found peace.

When I first arrived in the Kingdom to attend a conference in Jeddah, quite simply, I fell in love with the underlying reality of the country. But therein lies the problem: it was indeed buried under a layer of décor shown to Westerners. Bring them in for business, shower them with graciousness, lavish meals upon them, give them coach rides to visit old Jeddah or the Red Sea, and then send them home after three days in hopes that they will reveal the positive side of the Kingdom. It rarely works.

I could not help but wonder how much money had been squandered on such repeated trips, year after year, decade after decade, to little avail. These visitors do little other than return and brag about having been chosen for this elite ritual, and only regurgitate what they choose to see despite the frills: women in black, men in white, segregation in restaurants and the ban on women driving. All the money spent on these delegations has borne little fruit, as people firm in their convictions before arriving are reluctant to change their longstanding opinions. Perhaps it is time to remember

the adage: repeating the same thing over and over while expecting a different result is the definition of insanity.

Even ex-pats who have lived in and loved the Kingdom for decades bear a large measure of responsibility for the error in its perception: They are not writing editorials for the Western media explaining why they live here when this is one of the most effective countermeasures to the stream of vitriolic attacks from the press.

When I first visited I saw instead a culture steeped in history and hospitality, proud and strong, pious and charitable. On my initial five-week trip I did not remain in hotels enjoying room service: I stayed with middle class Saudi families in their homes, enjoying their traditions. I was more than happy to eat Saudi style on the floor, grateful for not being judged for preferring the night to the day and relieved at the lack of pressure to be responsible for all errands around the clock. I was able instead to enjoy conversation and companionship, learning more as I asked more.

However, during all my conversations, one question remained unanswered. When I asked, What makes you proud to be a Saudi, "being Muslim" or "being Arab" was as common a reply as "being the home of the Two Holy Cities." For years Saudis have publicly apologized for the violence that has taken place within the Kingdom, as though they are all collectively responsible for being born in the same place as fifteen dead and one very wanted man. For years Saudis have admitted to the slow pace of reform and change. Repeatedly I heard the despair and cynicism blinding Saudis to what is happening in front of their eyes: palpable change, construction growth, new

institutions, reform efforts, and the disappearing *mutawa* or religious police. So much to be proud of, but Saudi politeness and kindness allow the West to trample upon them, naming the Kingdom a threat to "democracy" and the "free" world.

Open Letter to Saudis:

Upon returning to the West, I wrote an article entitled "Open Letter To Saudis," published in the *Arab News* and *Al-Riyadh* newspaper. I was inundated with letters from Saudi men and women, commending my words as having revealed a hard truth: people wrote from all walks of life including foreign laborers and princes, and admitted "we don't talk about ourselves – we are too private." I felt that it was time for Saudis to take pride in the Kingdom in action, not just spirit.

It is also time for Saudis to describe to the world their respect for women and how family takes priority. This is not only cultural ("tribal") but also per Qu'ranic tradition and rules. If men have more than one wife, they are in the vast minority: only six out of 1,000 Muslim men have two wives or more, permitted only on condition that the wives are treated absolutely equally. Few can afford such luxury.

It is time to be loud and vociferous in defense of the family above all else, which in the long run must endure intact. Examine the declivity of Western family values wherein single parents in the U.S. now outnumber traditional families, divorce rates are skyrocketing in favor of "serial monogamy," and children are shuttled from one

home to another across state lines thus failing to grow roots in any one home. All this bodes ill for the economic viability of the world's only remaining superpower: in denial, it has yet become a welfare state whilst insulting the economic social structure of Europe that has long prioritized its citizens with little objection. And it is a welfare state precisely because women are not taken care of by their families when raising children; more often than not they are left to fend for themselves, trying make ends meet in a society that gives few opportunities to those who take years out of the workforce to raise children, re-enter to make minimum wage of barely $6 (SR22) per hour, and see a paycheck reduced by 35 percent for state and federal taxes as well as social security and a pension they will never see. The average U.S. household wage is $37,500 per year, and bringing home $12,000 per year puts these women and children at the poverty level. They fall through the bureaucratic cracks, not making enough to live upon and feed their family yet making too much to qualify for government assistance, food stamps or health insurance.

Security Comparison:

It is necessary for Saudis to speak to the truth of the safety and freedom from crime within the Kingdom. Contrary to the image of a nation steeped in terror, it is more just to make demands upon the U.S., which is the world's leader in domestic murders, rape and spousal violence, as to how it dares accuse Saudi Arabia of such violence. Statistically the Kingdom is dead last in murders per capita, rapes per capita, and even burglaries— although

Saudi Arabia tragically has the highest per capita ratio of unpaid diplomatic parking tickets.

What about the U.S. charges of Saudi human rights abuse, when the abduction of children in America is so pervasive that it hardly merits a news story there anymore? Child molesters roam free in every neighborhood. Even when a Rabbi was caught recently on video in the process of attempting sexual relations with a young boy, the case was dropped and he suffered no legal consequences. Small children are used for the sexual perversions of their abductors, abused and often murdered in the most gruesome manners, so as to satisfy their kidnappers' psychosis. It is a well-known fact that the vilest of murderers in society are not Arab, Muslim, black or yellow: they are Caucasian males who always look like "like the nice boy next door." Where did such a sickness of man's mind arise? It is not rampant in the Saudi male.

Western Stereotypical Image of Saudi Women:

Let us address the stereotypical image of the apparent abuse of women in Saudi Arabia by their husbands (clearly forbidden in Islam). When news anchor Rania Al-Baz went public, the horror of Saudi men's behavior toward their wives was exacerbated in the West by an Oprah Winfrey program extolling Ms. Al-Baz's bravery. Ms. Al-Baz failed to contextualize.

As tragic as her story was, and as important as it is to discuss openly, it remains a fact that almost one-third of American women (31 percent) are physically or sexually

abused by a husband or boyfriend at some point in their lives; nearly 10 percent of American schoolgirls have been forced to have sex against their will; and three women are killed every day in America due to domestic partner murder.

India has the most consistently high rate of spousal abuse in the world, with over 40 percent of women reporting domestic violence. Burning women alive on funeral pyres is still commonplace, although reported dowry killings did drop by 600 cases in 2003. Aborting female fetuses is also commonplace in India, and China also still maintains forced family planning – one child per family – resulting in exorbitant cases of infanticide: dead babies are abandoned upon the street, passers-by are immune to the horror of a gift of a life never known. The practice of the mutilation of female genitalia throughout Africa is still rampant, despite education efforts by human rights groups. Yet the United States exerts one-tenth its condemnation towards the barbaric practices of these nations as it does towards Saudi Arabia. If the Kingdom exported potatoes instead of oil, would it too be immune?

If democracy includes the export of the largest pornographic industry throughout the world, can one really take seriously the words of government officials in the United States? Corruption is part and parcel of American politics; bribery, otherwise legitimately known as lobbying, is par for the course of Congressmen or women. The second largest lobbying group on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. is AIPAC (American Israeli Political Action Committee), so one hardly need question the one-sided Middle Eastern foreign policy.

As Saudis apologize for a slower rate of progress and reform, it would be wise to recall that it took the United States over 200 years, until 1920, to grant women the right to vote. Why should the tempo of change have to precisely correlate to that of 21st century America? Until World War I women covered their arms and legs, only hoisting their hemlines in victorious freedom after a bloody war. In 19th century Victorian England even pianos were draped with heavy velvet, as the legs of the furniture were considered too erotic and suggestive to men, potentially arousing their delicate sensibilities in mixed company.

Instead the men went off to their private men-only smoking clubs, or "women not allowed" teashops. Women the world over throughout history wore head attire until only recently, the post World War II era liberating them from girdles, scarves and bustles. Head covers were removed when women had to work in the factories to keep the war machine fed. The West has undergone a fashion revolution only in the last 50 years; Arabia did not demand that the Puritans of America rid themselves of restrictive corsets in favor of the billowing *abaya*.

Nuns, priests, and rabbis cover the heads, religious Jewish women wear wigs and scarves, Catholics cover their heads in church, but Saudi women are "oppressed" for their *hijabs*? Recently in the Eastern province, a hospital asked female job applicants to remove their *niqabs* (face veils) or risk unemployment; it was the women who protested the attack upon their preferred method of dress. The *abaya* is cooler, more fluid, and practical; it should be a choice for the Saudi women, not a source of ridicule to

an ignorant non-Arab press.

American women are paid 75 cents to the dollar compared to men; the Prophet's first wife was his employer, a successful and powerful businesswoman. Another wife, Aisha, fought in battle alongside men more than 1,400 years ago. Today women have run in elections in Saudi Arabia, have attained the highest educational levels, run companies, and are even training as security guards. Women head hospitals and universities, run engineering organizations, and write their strong opinions in the Kingdom's newspapers.

Islam Honors Women:

In stark contrast to the West, Islam considers wives who remain at home with her children to be respectful working women. Only since the Industrial Revolution has there been a change to the inheritance rights of women in Europe, females being considered less than second class citizens often with no rights at all. Often it was left to the whims of the eldest male heir as to whether the mother and daughters had a roof over their heads upon the death of the father. Yet in Islam women were given solid rights of inheritance more than 1,400 years ago.

Islam forbids racism. It took America until 1963, after riots and protests, before blacks were granted civil rights and freedom, and an end to segregation. Bias remains rampant and races still do not mix freely despite politically correct advertising. Visit any shopping mall in the U.S. today and groups of black teenagers separate from groups of white teenagers who in turn separate from groups of

Hispanic teenagers. Covert as that racism may be, and as denied as it often is, nonetheless it is overt in all manner of daily issues when one looks closely.

Driving:

We cannot fail to address this one subject that seemingly represents the reprehensible within the Kingdom to all of America. Having spent an average of two hours daily in one of the worst cities for traffic delays in the entire U.S., just to take children to school and back, it is a pleasure not to have to repeat the process in Riyadh traffic. Few women I talk with in the Kingdom are racing to get drivers' licenses, although most of those educated overseas already have them; instead they are quite content to be taken straight to the door of a mall or house rather than spend precious time searching for a safe parking space.

Upon exiting at night in the dark, a Saudi woman does not need to worry about being attacked on the way to her car at the back of a parking garage; her driver, family member or taxi is waiting. More importantly, given the care Islam gives to the protection of women, should anyone be racing to throw women into the streets where teenagers are recklessly driving?

I do not remain immune to criticisms from many women in the Kingdom who vehemently disagree with me. "What are you doing to us? Are you trying to stop the process? Stop being so conservative," they shout. Yet I have lived in two cultures vastly different to Saudi Arabia: liberal and open Europe, and "democratic" Puritanical America, and have seen the consequences of rapid change,

overt freedom (often a euphemism for open sexuality) and "personal responsibility."

We humans are designed largely to have a group mentality in that there will always arise a leader, a guide, the Alpha male. Daily we struggle (*jihad*) with right and wrong. As such, individual rules and freedoms cannot work effectively: laws and rules are made for good reason. Like the discipline of a child, it is hard but far more effective in the long run. Let a child run rampant, as seems to be a moral argument with today's parents the world over, and one creates a creature unwelcome in society who runs roughshod over everything in his path. Perhaps somewhat like America has become the world's 21st century out-of-control child.

Conclusion:

I see plenty of areas for change within the Kingdom, but racing to meet the clock of the West will damage the values so inherent to Islam and the Land of the Two Holy Mosques. Reform is coming to the Kingdom, and from within; it should not, however, be rushed. When the Berlin Wall fell, the USSR collapsed, and chaos ensued. When China opened the doors to reform, they chose a slower method and have thus far been relatively successful.

Problems must be addressed, and they are for Saudis to take up themselves. Certainly there is no shortage of intelligence in the country: English is pervasive, the younger generation are Internet savvy and computer literate, and are able to self-teach where necessary. The middle class and assuredly upper class of Saudi society

are multi-lingual, which cannot be said for native English-speakers, who are loath to condescend to speak in another tongue. Therefore the information highway makes it possible for few in Saudi Arabia to escape knowledge.

In order to continue my career as a Saudi-U.S. political analyst, I knew I needed to be inside Saudi Arabia, not outside looking in.

As life changing as this change has been, I do not regret one moment of my decision to leave it all behind and start afresh.

It is said that when a door closes, a window opens. In my case, I am sure that the window closed, and the doors have finally been opened.

Western Misperceptions of Saudi Women

(Ann Morris)

When Ionis Thompson told her friends that her husband Andrew had been posted to Saudi Arabia, they sighed with unsolicited sympathy. Rather than celebrate the challenges of a new adventure in a different country with a fascinating culture, they offered her their sympathy: "Everyone felt sorry for me!"

Her friends' perception of the life in front of her was of a lonely existence: behind closed doors, behind a veil and cloak, forbidden to do many things that Western women take for granted — from working and driving to travelling on her own or sitting on a beach in a swimsuit.

They had a stereotypical Western view of what would become of her in a society where they believed women's rights and women's ability to do almost anything were suffocated by Islamic tradition and a dominant male society. Their Western perception was that women not only didn't have a face, they didn't have a place or a voice within the hierarchy of Saudi Arabian society.

But Ionis soon found that life in Saudi Arabia was tremendously rewarding and not at all cloistered. She didn't drive but she did work — teaching English to Saudi women, an opportunity that gave her an entree to Saudi society and a better understanding of what Saudi women were really like — beyond the veil which is such a focus of Western attention. When time allowed she made regular forays into the desert to visit and explore the vast wealth of archaeological treasures. And she never yearned for the life she left back in England.

The major problem with Western misperceptions about women in Saudi Arabia is that the West sees no further than the outward trappings of a Saudi woman's life — the veil, the inability to travel without permission and the inability to drive or vote.

A recent article about Saudi women in the major British newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph,* started by highlighting Western perceptions:

> *"Saudi Arabia has the worst reputation for the suppression of women in the world. Enveloped in cloaks and veils, segregated into all-women zones, forbidden to drive and unable to vote, required to ask permission of their male guardians to travel or obtain an ID card, their condition is considered as much of an international scandal as many of the human rights abuses against which Amnesty International campaigns."*

"But these are not the main issues," said a Saudi friend who I will call Sara as she prefers to remain anonymous. Sara, whose home is in the Eastern province, has taught

in England for the last 12 years, so she is acutely aware of the criticism and misperceptions facing Saudi women in the West.

"The West feels that the veil is the biggest constraint on Saudi women. They feel that the veil or the *abaya* somehow prevents women from doing things, but it does not."

The Veil

Most non-Muslim Westerners see the *abaya* and veil as oppressive, clothing imposed on Saudi women and on Muslims by men. This is a double misconception — men would often prefer women not to wear the veil, particularly when living in the West. Western society cannot understand why someone would choose to shroud themselves in black from head to toe.

It is a matter of irritation to many Saudi women that the West makes such an issue of their dress as Bridget Kendal, the BBC's diplomatic editor, found when she confronted a group of young Saudi women about their dress while on a visit to the Kingdom in May 2006.

She talked about the Saudi women's dress code in her report on Radio 4's highly regarded "From our own correspondent" program.

> *"There were five young Saudi women, some students, some working, one about to be wed in an arranged marriage.*
>
> *"They looked at me with their bright vivacious eyes, all of them in black from head to foot. One girl even veils her face, but she shows off the*

> *butterfly sleeves of her* abaya.
> *"It's the latest fashion," she explains proudly, defending the Saudi dress code.*
> *"Time and again, the women I met in Jeddah and Riyadh insisted how women dressed was not the priority, that reform in Saudi Arabia was about other things."*
> *"The abaya for us is like the sari for Indians," says Sabah, an elegant university professor. And it's hypocritical of the West to applaud Nepal and Bhutan for preserving their heritage and then claim Saudi Arabia's traditions oppressed women."*

But try getting people in the UK to understand that. It will take a hundred and more reports like Bridget's before Western society begins to change its view.

Above all the West finds the veil a real barrier to communication. A media and political storm was ignited in the autumn of 2006 when former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw wrote that he saw the wearing of the veil as a "visible statement of separation and of difference." This was swiftly followed by the story of a veiled Muslim teacher's assistant losing her job and raged into the winter when a British immigration judge asked a woman legal executive to take off her veil "to assist communication" during a court hearing.

Some Western commentators have seen the apparent attack on the veil as racist and inappropriate, but others see it as a positive lancing of a long festering misunderstanding between two different societies. They believe that open debate is better than silent condemnation. By discussing

the issue, the "wearer" at least has an opportunity to validate and explain why she feels strongly about her chosen mode of dress.

Women Driving

Another major misperception about Saudi women is their dissatisfaction with not being permitted to drive. As Saudi ambassadors to the UK past and present have found, it is the one inevitable question on almost every Western journalist's wish list when they ask for an interview. As each ambassador in turn has been at pains to explain, there is actually no law against women driving: it is cultural.

What the Western media finds almost inconceivable is that rather than continuing on a campaign to drive, Saudi women, faced with mounting criticism, quickly gave up the fight.

Western impatience faces Arab patience. Europe has seen dramatic change happen through revolution just as often as through evolution. Saudi Arabian society in general appears to be against revolutionary dissent.

"As a society we seek approval from one another all the time," said Sara, "particularly from within our wider family. The West sees certain forms of rebelliousness as attractive and even as a sign of change — Saudis just don't see it that way."

The car is also a highly visible sign of independence in the West keenly sought by all young people — men and woman. It is almost inconceivable to a Westerner that you wouldn't fight tooth and nail for the right to drive.

The relative importance of freedoms like this is a mark

of the real difference between Saudi and British societies. Although it would be foolish to suggest that many Saudi women wouldn't like to drive, they are perhaps not as frustrated by it as the West thinks they should be.

Education and Business

Another misperception in the West is that Saudi women are not offered the same educational opportunities as men and few if any work. There are currently more women graduating from Saudi universities than men, and women are increasingly entering the Saudi workforce but that is still a surprise to Western journalists.

Cassandra Jardine, writing in *The Daily Telegraph* about the Saudi delegation to the annual Women in Business Conference commented:

> *"Had I not seen a cluster of them (Saudi businesswomen) all in dark trouser suits, I would not have thought they existed."*
>
> Pat Lancaster of *Middle East* magazine wrote of the same delegation: *"The delegates were intelligent, interesting, funny and above all optimistic... Listening to them speak about their jobs, their children and their ambitions, they could have been from anywhere in the world."*

She concluded:

> *"Saudi businesswomen have often criticised the West for refusing to take them seriously. Far too frequently while espousing theories of gender equality, Westerners are happy to deal with Arab men while looking through the figure in the black*

chador, even though she may well own her own company!"

As Princess Loulwa keenly pointed out to Western journalists when she was in London in 2006, women own 30 percent of businesses in Saudi Arabia. "You find women in every business in Saudi Arabia from door-to-door saleswomen to manufacturing.

"The difference today is that women used to need a man to represent them to get a licence to operate. Following recent legislation, women can now do their own legal work; they no longer need a male representative. Women are now in control."

It is these changes that are so important to Saudi society, which are not seen or appreciated by the West. But a Western journalist flying from one story to the next, stopping to take a few notes along the way, often misses the nuances of change within Saudi society. The West's misperception is rooted in a conviction that its way of life is a desirable model for the modern world. The West has difficulty accepting any other as equally fair.

Saudi Interdependence and British Independence

Saudis are brought up to be interdependent; to value the extended family circle, which they can rely on and who in turn will rely on them. British children are taught to strive for and to value their independence. To "stand on your own two feet" is the very act of growing up within Western society, and being dependent on others is viewed as a sign of weakness.

"Many Saudi women are never alone," said Ionis.

"Most are constantly surrounded by members of their extended family and don't have the same concept of being on their own. I found that Saudi women were appalled by our comparative isolation."

It is often the larger, wider family that Saudis miss most when they move to the West temporarily. One young Saudi friend who spent her teenage years in America explained how she yearned to return home, despite all the freedoms that America offered her. Her mother was in the middle of her doctorate at an American university when the horrific events of 9/11 occurred. The family made the decision not to return to Saudi Arabia in case her mother was then unable to return to complete her doctorate. For two years they were on their own, desperately missing the constant, intimate, social interchange that is so much a part of life in Saudi Arabia.

It is a story that is useful to tell in the West where many people cannot comprehend how a young Saudi woman could find living in the Kingdom preferable to living in the West. Neither does the West appreciate how shocked Saudi society is by the way elderly relatives are left to fend for themselves in the West.

"I think what I find saddest of all is that we don't seem able to accept one another's differences. There seems to be a belief that because we are different, we cannot be happy," said Sara.

Ionis agrees: "I found that all my British friends had this view that Saudi women were unhappy, but they are not. In my experience, despite the frustrations they tended

to be in many respects more content and on the whole less prone to depression than women in the West."

Political Rights

Young Saudi women living in the West often tire of being constantly pushed to "stand up for their rights," including their right to vote in Saudi Arabia's nascent political democracy.

"The main reaction from Westerners once they learn I am from Saudi Arabia is to tell me to "fight for our rights like a suffragette," said Norah, a recent graduate of the King Fahd Academy, the Saudi Arabian school in London.

"I remember going on a school trip to British Aerospace. While we were there, they gave us a whole presentation on suffragettes. Personally I couldn't see the connection between the aircraft industry (which was what we were there to learn about) and women's rights. I think it is interesting that they wanted to tell us what to do."

She sees the issue of women's rights within the Kingdom as something for the women of Saudi Arabia to sort out in their own way.

Dr. Selwa Hazzaa, who heads the ophthalmology department at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center, has done an admirable job in the West of explaining the current situation within the Kingdom. She describes herself as a pioneer within Saudi's young society, but adds: "I don't like to go against my roots. I believe in fighting the system in the system."

This desire not to buck the system but to wait for an

organic, seamless change is something British reformers don't understand. Pressure groups in Britain implore their supporters to join them by the thousand at rallies and on marches pushing for a change of legislation on everything from fox hunting in the British countryside to participation in the war in Iraq.

It is hard for the Western media to understand the Kingdom's completely different and gradual approach to change. The reality is that change happens either of necessity or when men or women are uncomfortable or unhappy with their lives. As the British poet and critic Samuel Johnson wrote in his *Dictionary of the English Language*: "Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better."

The West doesn't appreciate that Saudi women are not only reasonably comfortable with their lot, they are also generally more financially comfortable than their Western counterparts, even when they are not rich. Life in the West is expensive and much as there is some pride in being a working woman within the West, the vast majority of Western women primarily work because they need to boost their family income. Even those who follow a career path sometimes yearn to be freer, to be a "lady that lunches" rather than one chained to a desk from 9 to 5.

Independence has brought its own problems for Western women, as Betty Freiden, the American feminist, wrote in her book *Second Stage*: "Today, the problem that has no name is how to juggle work, love, home and children."

It's a problem that on the face of it Saudi women could

find easier to resolve as more and more of them join the workforce — as they will still be able to turn to their extended, interconnected family network for support at home.

The West believes that Saudi women are not really given the right to choose how they live, but perhaps we in the West sometimes confuse the right to choose with independence. This reminds me of what the Russian writer Fedor Dostoevsky wrote: “What man wants is simply independent choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead.”

What the West perhaps needs to understand is that by forcing our perceptions of how things are and how things should be on Saudi society we are infringing on Saudi Arabia’s right to independent choice: to change or not to change, and how to change.

Negative Western Portrayals of Saudi Women - - Why?

(Barbara Ferguson)

Whether you believe in conspiracies or argue ignorance as the cause, few in Saudi Arabia would feel comfortable with America's portrayal and understanding of the Saudi woman.

The answer is easy to ascertain. Americans' impressions tend to focus on perceptions, rather than realities about Saudi women: "They're repressed because they are forced to wear black and keep their faces and hair covered," or "They're oppressed because they aren't allowed to express themselves," are descriptions commonly heard.

Who, or what is responsible for these misperceptions? And why are so many in the West determined to hold onto their misunderstanding of the Muslim woman as the one they feel more comfortable with, rather than the reality?

Reporters' Ignorance:

From a journalistic perspective, it certainly doesn't help that many U.S. reporters are woefully ignorant of the

Middle East. While embedded with the Marines during the invasion of Iraq, I was surprised to see how many of my colleagues, even before they were embedded, resisted learning about the Iraqi people as they prepared to cover a war in their land.

An interesting example of this occurred during my stay at the Hilton Hotel in Kuwait City. I was invited to a Kuwaiti reception at a private home and urged to bring colleagues with me. Most of these reporters were cooling their heels at the hotel waiting for the war to start but they declined the invitation. One reporter said: "No thanks. I already did my Kuwaiti story." Only two reporters accompanied me to the event.

None of my American colleagues covering the Iraq war spoke Arabic or tried to learn it. A few had a rough idea of the region's history. Many seemed excited with the prospect of having an adventure - covering a war - but most didn't really seem to want to invest in experiencing the human side of the invasion, and its ultimate consequences.

And if they did read books about the region, culture, history or the people, the books were written by Americans. Ultimately, as they were unable to communicate or understand what was being said in Arabic, it was extremely easy to misunderstand the crux of the story, or even distance themselves from their perceptions of the situation on the ground.

Western writers unfamiliar with Arab culture and language are, quite simply, bound to elicit cultural prejudices.

As my weeks turned into months embedded with

the Marines, I also became concerned with the quality of the work my colleagues chose to report. Even now, I hear stories of Iraqis who are hired by American news organizations to find news stories and bring them back into the relative safety of the Green Zone, where the American reporters then turn them around and publish them as their stories. The American reporters are not interacting with Iraqis on the street, and are unable to verify the news being brought to them.

Ultimately, their lack of professional exchanges and knowledge cannot help but be reflected in the stories they file. As a result, we should not blame the American public for their ignorance of the Middle East, Islam and the Arab people, as they must rely on such reporters for their news.

Deliberate Distortion of Facts:

Many reasons for the media's negative portrayal of Saudi and Arab women are fairly easy to explain. With a few colleagues I sense an agenda and a deliberate effort to distort, but more often I chalk it up to a simple lack of understanding, knowledge, and appreciation of another culture, religion, language and people.

For Americans, the fact that Saudi women can't drive or have to wear an *abaya* is often used as symbolic shorthand for a whole gamut of human rights issues. "Americans think that if Saudi women can't drive and have to wear *abayas*, they must be underprivileged and backward and repressed and we must promote their development," one

journalist observed.

Such distortions make it easy for the Western media to portray Saudi women as people to be pitied, and Saudi men as "bad" because they reduce their women to such a pitiable status. Thus, the U.S. typically portrays the Saudi woman as being powerless.

Many Western feminists writers and the mainstream media have focused their attention on the subject of Arab, especially Saudi, women as the 'oppressed women.' Representing the Eastern woman, she is stereotypically assumed to be oppressed, inferior, traditional, backward, and mysterious.

The foundation of this idea can be found in Orientalist discourse, as highlighted by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism,* which describes the high proportion of scholarly writing and academia that pits Eastern and Islamic culture against European and Western culture.

Prejudice:

Prejudice shows itself prominently in Western feminist writing, which frequently displays a tendency to use Western cultural norms to judge a Saudi or an Arab woman's life.

In her book, *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed, the first professor of women's studies in religion at Harvard Divinity School, writes about how European domination of the Near East formed the basis of Western opinions about Muslim women.

She describes the formation of British imperialistic

perspectives around the late 19th century and the imposition of the British education system, which created strong Anglophiles. She also notes that in the industrialized world, the foundations that define women's movements have been dominated by white, middle-class women.

Bias of Western Media:

Negative stereotypes of Muslim women also arise from Western media's tendency, for whatever reason, to latch onto a handful of examples of unjust behavior in the Islamic world, and use them to brand Islam as a backwards and "fundamentalist" religion, especially in its treatment of women, ignoring the fact that Islam was the first religion to accord women equal rights.

Islamphobia:

The concept of Islamic 'threats' also has deep, historical roots in the West. Some scholars and politicians in the United States help fuel the upsurge in official anti-Islamic propaganda, negative feelings and religious phobia.

Historically, the West has had a tendency to treat Islam as an enemy, a threat and a challenge — geopolitically, culturally, economically, philosophically and, last but not least, theologically. Not only because Islam is the last divine religion but also because it presents itself as a complete system of life. This posed great problems on European, and eventually American civilizations, which were based on Christian faith, norms and political power base.

From the early days of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad was insulted with names such as 'false Prophet' or 'impostor,' by Christians of that day. The Qur'an was labeled as a copy of the Bible. Efforts to undermine and destroy Islam were made by the Byzantine Empire and the Christian church.

The Crusades, the Arab conquest of Spain, followed by sacking of the Moors, the Turkish Ottoman Empire's inroads in the heart of Europe and colonization caused great dismay in the Christian West. More recently, the West has been angered and dismayed by the 1973 oil price crises, the 1978-1979 the Islamic revolution in Iran, and now the war in Iraq.

As a result of the end of the Cold War, the perceived Islamic threat has acquired a particularly explosive power in the 1990s. We no longer have the Soviet Union or Communism to serve as "the enemy" to justify expensive and extensive military apparatus. It was in the mid-1980s at the very latest that the search began for new enemies to justify skyrocketing arms budgets and offensive military policies, at first as part of the Communist threat and then taking its place — Islam.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, DC brought fear and misunderstanding of Islam to the forefront and – since the terrorists were part of the al-Qaeda network — made it easy for Islam to be mischaracterized as a terrorist religion.

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on American soil, the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic

Relations, CAIR, has reported on a backlash of hundreds of hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims annually in America. Mosques and businesses were trashed, community members received bomb threats, and children were harassed at school, men in turbans and women in headscarves have been attacked and/or verbally assaulted. The Patriot Act has allowed hundreds of suspected Islamic militants to be jailed and kept there without due process of law. Human rights organizations say these arrests are often cases of innocent Muslim men imprisoned without cause, and say it is a crime that they are denied lawyers and representation.

Hollywood and Fabrication:

From news on television screens to fiction on the movie screens, Islam and Arabs segued easily into 'the enemy' thanks to the film industry.

Hollywood has a legacy of fabricating an eroticized and exoticized Orient, titillating audiences with distortions of adventure and lust in a 'savage' desert landscape.

The Arab stereotype in films produced in the 1920s was mostly an unsavory concoction of exoticism, abduction, banditry, revenge, and slavery. The plots invariably portrayed Arabs as the adversaries, pitting them against Western heroes.

The most famous example of early Arab-bashing films was *The Sheik* (1921), which starred Rudolph Valentino as the lusty sheik who sets out to seduce a young, fair,

Anglo woman. The film was so successful that more swashbuckling melodramas of East vs. West were churned out for decades.

Hollywood's flippant anti-Arab directors have continued to cast Arabs in a violent light, according to well-known media critic Jack Shaheen. In his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*, Shaheen points out: "In Hollywood's films, pause and visualize the reel Arab. What do you see? Black beard, headdress, and dark sunglasses. In the background—a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels."

The image is easy to conjure, according to Shaheen, because the vast majority of Hollywood's features portray Arabs in this stereotypical way. Unfortunately, such relentless stereotyping is not without real world consequence.

When the Oklahoma City's federal building was bombed in 1995, Arab-Americans were the first to be blamed - Rupert Murdoch's U.S. papers headlined: "In the name of Islam" over a picture of a dead child.

Throughout its history, Hollywood has been criticized for its stereotypical portrayal of minority groups: the incompetent black, the savage Native American, the sinister Asian. But while the film industry has evolved to more accurately depict most of these groups, Jack Shaheen argues that Arabs remain the "reel bad guys" of the silver screen. From Bedouin bandits to gun-toting terrorists, Shaheen says Arabs are not fairly represented on the big screen. Having examined the roots of Hollywood's anti-Arab bias, Shaheen says this bias has tainted Americans'

views of the Middle East.

Having examined the choices and effects of the film industry, let us again examine and summarize the crucial role the media play in regard to forming the Western image of Arabs and Muslims and affecting the attitudes people have toward Arab and Islamic women. Media perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes that under estimate Arab and Muslim women, devalue their contributions to development, and attribute negative qualities to their roles in society.

A privileged tool for the transmission of information and ideas, media exert an enormous influence and, consequently, on the nature of relationships between different societies. The status of women in the Arab world is a hotly contested and contentious area. Everyone, it seems, from the most ill-informed member of the non-Arab public to professors in prestigious universities, has a view on the "oppressed," "invisible" and "powerless" Arab woman. The reality, of course, is far more complex.

Centuries ago, when Christian and Jewish women were still considered inferior — the originators of sin and the property of their husbands— Muslim women were being given shares in inheritance, allowed to choose or refuse prospective husbands, and were considered equal to men in the eyes of God.

Conclusion:

Today, however, from the Western perspective, Muslim

women are clumped into a single group and viewed as homogenous clones of one another. Meanwhile their Christian and Jewish counterparts are seen as individuals.

America is also viewed as trying to force its version of feminism down the throats of Saudi women, and Arab and Muslim women. Given that America currently has more than a 50 percent divorce rate, and the majority of children here now are born out of wedlock, it is no wonder that the U.S. version of feminism has been rejected in the Islamic world.

Saudi women and Muslim women in general believe Americans should not pity Muslim women or judge them, but simply work to understand, if not respect, their culture and traditions.

Part Two
Field Survey

Methodology Overview

Saudi women, who represent 49.9 percent[1] of the population, are part of Saudi society, culture, traditions and customs. The culture, traditions and customs are derived from Islam, which grants a woman the position that suits her nature and the responsibilities that she assumes in light of her physical and psychological characteristics.

This position, the features of which were identified by God, no doubt takes into account the nature of social life throughout the ages. The position ensures that a woman is capable of positive participation and can contribute to her society without being assigned tasks and responsibilities that she could not bear and without barring her from what she deserves.

As it is difficult to allege that the reality of Saudi society in regard to woman is identical to the theoretical concepts of Islam, this field survey comes to give an outlook of the viewpoints of a group of Saudi women in an attempt to present a genuine and objective vision about the situation of Saudi woman.

(1) Statistical Book on Population and Housing Census in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2004).

This part of the book hopes to answer fundamental questions about Saudi women affairs, often discussed in intellectual circles and reported by the media at both the domestic and international levels. The answers to these questions, given by prominent Saudi women, may reflect a true picture of the reality of Saudi woman. A qualitative approach based on description and analysis of information, collected through open interviews, was used.

This analytical reading derives its importance from:

1- It is a realistic vision not based upon hypothetical concept that may be difficult to deal with or apply on the ground.

2- It is a vision that covers the viewpoints of a group of ladies who have an active presence that reflects part of the activities of Saudi women and their distinguished participation in the different domains. These participating ladies, again, contribute to the cultural and intellectual discussions about woman at the local and international levels.

3- It touches the concerns and causes of Saudi woman in an objective way through their self-experience and the reality they live in.

This analytical study targeted 50 ladies representing most parts of the Kingdom's administrative regions who work in different fields. Forty-five women responded to the questions put before them.

The following table shows their demographic characteristics[1]:

(1) In such a qualitative study, the interpretation of data does not necessarily depend upon large number of participants, but the nature of this type of research is exploratory and open-ended. Small numbers of people are interviewed in-depth and/or a relatively small number of focus groups are conducted.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	Segments	Number
Age	25-34	19
	35-44	17
	Older than 44	09
Marital Status	Married	22
	Single	18
	Divorced	02
	Widowed	03
Education	Below University	03
	Higher Diploma	03
	University	18
	Masters	9
	PhD	12
Specialization	*Sharia* Studies	06
	Social and Humanity Studies	18
	Scientific Studies	21
Occupation	Journalist	04
	Teacher	05
	University Professor	12
	Administrative employee	15
	Independent writer	01
	Student	04
	Housewife	02
	Pharmacist	01
	Doctor	01
Region	Riyadh	18
	Makkah	08
	Eastern Province	05
	Aseer	04
	Jaizan	06
	Madinah	01
	Qassim	02
	Tabuk	01
Cultural Activities	Symposia and Lectures	16
	Art and poetry	07
	Press writings	12
Total		45

Reality of Saudi Women: A Preface

Planning for women's partnership in society:

In the past, a Saudi woman used to participate with men in the different rural works. She practiced sheep herding and farming in addition to looking after her children and husband.

Nowadays with the qualitative development of the Saudi society, it is natural that the roles of women have changed accordingly. But this change has been, to some extent, conservative. Gradually Saudi women responded to the new roles required by the society and as a result they became doctors, teachers, opinion leaders and journalists. Consequently the forms of women's participation in society increased in a way that conforms to the mobility of the society itself.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the world has witnessed the start of globalization of women's issues. Women's issues have not remained an internal affair for any country. They have become universal issues and a method by which the Western model and the Western culture penetrate other cultures.

The waves of globalization reached Saudi Arabia at a time when people began talking about emancipation of women, on the basis of the principle that women are similar to men. Some of those who embraced liberal thoughts were influenced by this vision, which has become a seed for conflict in which individual interests are given priority over the values and interests of society.

In contrast to the symmetry principle that some people advocate, Islam, in general and particularly in issues that

concern women, adopts a partnership approach within the framework of integration not symmetry. The principle of symmetry adopted by some of those who write about women, does not represent the correct logic in the interpretation of the relation between men and women. The relation between them is based upon integration, as everyone has his or her own characteristics that distinguish him or her from the other. Consequently these characteristics require him or her to undertake a number of integrated tasks and duties to realize the objectives of society in a comprehensive way.

The partnership approach in the interpretation of the relationship between men and women constitutes a suitable beginning of reading the real situation of Saudi woman. For its view of life, this reality is based on the Islamic *sharia*. The Islamic *sharia* does not call for symmetry of a woman with a man similar to the global trend in this context, but this relation is based upon the partnership that realizes integration of roles and tasks inside the society.

It is important as we are discussing this issue to draw the general picture of the strategies and objectives of this reality as outlined by the consecutive Saudi Development Plans. These objectives and strategies reflect the forms of participation and available opportunities for Saudi woman. We are taking these opportunities as a criterion for measuring the aspects of reality in order to have the interpretation of this reality associated with the social system of the Saudi woman.

In this context, the consecutive Saudi Development Plans have embarked on improving the situations of Saudi

women through the expansion of available opportunities in education, health and others, in addition to finding means to empower women to benefit from these opportunities. For instance, the first category of the Sixth Development Plan is "development of national manpower." The seventh strategic base of the plan includes a challenge that reads, "Work to increase a woman's contribution to the manpower according to the Islamic *sharia*." Within the Seventh Development Plan focus continues on developing national manpower. The ninth strategic base of the plan reads, "Expansion of women's work areas in a way that does not contradict the Islamic *sharia*." Within the developments of the economic and social aspects taking place in Saudi Arabia and the developments at the regional and international arenas, there emerged new challenges related to the active participation of women in socio-economic development. Women should occupy a prominent role in development priorities.

"This is an indication of the awareness of her role and her influence on social development and the desire to continue supporting and enhancing her role to take part in building the homeland. [A] Woman is half the society and is the one responsible for bringing up the other half, consequently empowering and qualifying her will reflect on the production of the whole society and complete the process of stability and development."(1) This is what planners of the Eighth Development Plan have inspired.

(1) Part of a speech delivered by HRH Princess Adela bint Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, at Khadeeja bint Khuwailed Forum in 2007. The Forum was under the theme (Saudi Woman in 2010).

The plan's concern has represented a prominent turning point in the efforts to develop women's situation and empower them to take part in economic and social development. The Plan has adopted a wider frame of reference, which placed more emphasis on an integrated perception for developing women's conditions instead of confining this development to their participation in the workforce.

The second strategic base of the plan states: "Giving concern to a woman's affairs, developing her capabilities and removing obstacles which hinder her participation in developmental activities within the Islamic values and instructions." The 8th Development Plan also includes objectives and policies that address women's issues like developing aspects of a woman's status at the education, health, social welfare and workforce levels. The plans of women's participation in economic activities were not confined to the strategic objectives and policies but also directly dealt with the crystallization of executive mechanisms to expand and deepen this participation.

Educational Status:

In a chapter about woman and human development the Human Development Report 2003, released by the Saudi ministry of economy and planning, carries details about the status of Saudi women in respect to education, employment and health. Despite the relative delay of female education compared to male, large numbers of girls have joined the various educational institutions. For instance, between 1975 -2002, the average annual growth

rate of female registration in education reached around 8 percent while males 4.2 percent.

The education sector has received significant attention. Concern has been given for all necessary aspects of the educational process such as buildings, teachers and curricula. As a result of this concern, the human resources development sector received about 57.1 percent of the total spending on development during the 7th Development Plan. By the end of the Plan, the number of male and female students at different general education stages reached around 4.6 million or about 30 percent of the population.

These students receive their education in more than 25,000 schools with more than 386,200 male and female teachers. Female students constitute 48.6 percent of the total number of students in the general education stages. The percentage of female students registered in the basic and secondary schools stood at 48 and 50.3 percent respectively. As for higher education (Diploma, university, and postgraduate studies), the number of female students surpassed the number of male students and the number of female graduates is 56.5 percent of the total number of graduates.

Health Status:

The remarkable strides that the Kingdom has made at having women benefit from educational opportunities were coupled by progress in women's health. During the past few years there have been significant improvements in terms of public health. Preventive health programs have led to remarkable reductions in the incidence of some diseases and the total eradication of others. Highly

efficient treatment services and advanced technologies are now available through an integrated network of health centers and hospitals around the Kingdom. As a result of the development of health services, the average life expectancy at birth for females has increased to 73.6 years and for males to 71 years in 2002.[1] Saudi Arabia's achievements in this field have surpassed those made in other Arab countries and match the achievements made in developed countries. The high increase of life expectancy at birth for females can be considered as an indicator for the total achievements in the health sector.

It would be useful here to clarify that the development of better health conditions for women has been achieved through the execution of two categories of health services: the first is the development of health services offered to citizens of both sexes. The success of these services can be measured by indicators related to numbers of hospitals, beds at these hospitals, primary health care centers, doctors, nurses and others. During the past four decades, the number of health institutions and health cadres has increased by rates that are higher than population growth. For instance, the number of doctors increased from 1,172 in 1970 to 3,3340 in 2002 and the number of nurses jumped from 3,261 to 69,273 during the same period. Health services are offered to citizens free of charge.

The second category of health services is related to the development of services concerned with women's health care like immunization of pregnant mothers against tetanus, raising the rates of deliveries attended by health

(1) UNDP, Data Base of Human Development Reports.

professionals, and raising the rate of pregnant mothers who were provided health care by health professionals.

Employment Status:

Indicators over the past three decades have shown that remarkable progress has been made in the educational and employment status of Saudi woman, leading to a qualitative leap in the situation of Saudi women in these areas. Progress in the areas of women's health and education not only supports the role of Saudi women as individual participants in society building, but also enables women to enjoy their rights to education and health. If education and health are fundamental pillars in the social life of women, the third pillar is employment.

Saudi women's entry into the labor market has been slow and late in the first stages of development: Their contribution did not exceed (5 percent) of the labor market until the end of the Fourth Development Plan in 1990. With the advancement of development phases and their subsequent reflection on the situation of women (especially in the area of education), women's contributions to the labor market began to increase gradually. In 2003 their contributions rose to 17 percent and females represented 14 percent of the work force.

With the increasing volume of Saudi women graduates from various education and training institutions, the field of investment has become one feasible option for Saudi women. This career suits many women especially those who are financially secure. The investment field provides a woman the enjoyment of participating in the labor market,

being her own boss, and achieving high social status, while meeting home responsibilities and participating in her nation's development.

Women's involvement in investment is a real contribution to economic development that may exceed, in its value added to the GDP, what any other women's contribution in development may add. Beside the capital it pumps into the different economic channels, women's investment also provides job opportunities that can be added to the GDP.

Observers who have followed the activities of Saudi businesswomen in the past few years have noticed their increasing participation in investment in various economic sectors. Available data indicates that the number of commercial registrations (CRs) owned by women are more than 22,500 representing about 4.7 percent of the number of enterprises registered in the Chambers of Commerce and Industry in the Kingdom. These CRs cover several types of economic activities. The average annual women's commercial registrations, as indicated by data from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, reached 1,565 in various business activities in the Kingdom as shown in 2004 registrations. Small and medium-scale enterprises are the favorite investment channels for Saudi businesswomen.[1]

(1) See details on the eighth Development Plan of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, chapter 17: Woman and Development (20052009-).

Women and Social Affairs

Saudi Women's Satisfaction With their Role in Society's Development:

While some of the participants in this study indicated that the experience of Saudi women in society development fields is still in its early stages, the majority (about 70 percent) expressed their satisfaction about this participation. This is what was confirmed by Dr. Nada Brinji as she said:

"I am fully satisfied with the reality of my participation in the development of Saudi society, because I have been working in the field of higher education for several years and have numerous opportunities to participate in the field of media broadcasting by preparing various programs for the French language department at Radio Jeddah. I hope I would get further opportunity for greater involvement in the area of guidance at the local level."

In this respect, Dr. Samar Al-Saqaf noted:

"Saudi Arabia stands at an important juncture at all levels, and actually women's status is witnessing renewed

mobility at the intellectual, economic and social levels. The woman is a new partner in construction and development. Participation is not only aimed at the development and shaping of society's future, but also self-development and upgrading a woman's capabilities and active and influential presence. It would be unfair to rate satisfaction of the present contributions of Saudi women. By careful reading, we can see that Saudi women have made several distinguished achievements at different levels."

On the other hand, some participants of the study (30 percent) noted that women's participation is concentrated in education and health areas. In this respect, Dr. Amal Al-Suwaih said:

"Generally, the participation of women in the development of Saudi society in all areas is clear and effective. But I see this participation is more effective in the area of education and health. This participation can clearly be noticed by whoever visits schools, universities or institutions as well as health colleges and hospitals. Because of my field of work, my participation in the areas of education and culture is greater and I'm looking forward to having more of a role in media development."

A number of participants (30 percent) expressed their satisfaction about the degree of their participation in the development of society through their posts, but they expressed their dissatisfaction about the availability of opportunities. In this context, Norah Al-Fayez said:

"I am satisfied, to a large extent, by my personal participation in the development of my society either in my capacity as manager of a government organization

concerns with management development, or through my volunteer work in a number of societies.

"I am currently a member of several committees, including the Advisory Commission of the National Museum, the Advisory Commission of King Abdul Aziz and his Companions Foundation for the Gifted, and have worked in the past on other committees. I've participated in numerous research and seminars. But I am not satisfied with the opportunities available to me as a woman in this society compared to the experience I have which enables me to actively contribute in developing the society, addressing its causes and making decisions especially in issues related to woman's affairs."

The general picture of the results of the field study regarding the reality of women's participation in the development of Saudi society indicates that the majority is satisfied about the degree of their participation. They said that this participation is concentrated in the areas of education and health, thereby reducing the opportunities for women's participation. At the same time, the participants called for diversification of the areas of women's involvement so as to meet the demands of modernization witnessed by the Kingdom in various fields.

Freedom of Saudi Women in her Society

Freedom is one of the flexible concepts used in excess by some people, while others neglect it. This has turned discussions about freedom into wide debates that lead to differences and disputes. Consequently, the concept of freedom is an absolute concept that cannot be dealt with

directly. Siham Al-Shihry referred to this meaning when she said:

"Before looking at my freedom from a narrow personal perspective as a woman, we have to look to the entire universe and the wide space it contains. This universe moves according to a very strict system that it never diverts from. If any diversion were to take place, the entire universe would be disturbed and collapse. We human beings are part of this universal system and God has established for us a restricted freedom within a certain framework that guarantees us to live a balanced and stable life psychologically and socially. If we abuse this, the whole human balance would be affected. A good proof of this is the human tragedy that we see around us for those who transgress the allowable limit of innate liberty."

This study is not concerned with the conceptual discussion of freedom, but tries to explore part of the reality of this freedom in the life of Saudi women. Seventy percent of the participants noted that their freedom is not restricted. For instance, Safya Abu Hilayel[(1)] said:

"I don't see that my freedom is restricted in my society and it never enters my mind that there are restrictions placed on me, as a woman, in one of the fields that require more freedom. I'm fully convinced that I exercise my natural freedom in my Saudi society."

At the same time, 30 percent of the participants attributed restrictions to women themselves. Haiba Burada said: "The Saudi woman needs to look far ahead. She is the one who can achieve her self-realization. She also needs

(1) Safya Abu Hilayel, member of an educational institution.

to be more ambitious and not to place any obstacles in her way as she is the one who made her own obstacles."

Others, representing 10 percent of the participants, confirmed that Saudi women's freedom is not restricted by laws, but the views of some men toward women may impede their movement. Dr. Muneera Al-Osaimi(1) said: "I've represented Saudi Arabia at the domestic, Gulf and international levels and I do not feel restricted by certain laws but some men have an inferior view of woman as a weak human being who needs to be protected even if she is able to protect herself."

At a time when 20 percent of the participants noted that the freedom of Saudi woman is restricted, they did not generalize this view. They pointed out that a Saudi woman has freedom but she lacks freedom in some areas in which she is as fully capable of bearing responsibility as a man. This view was expressed by Norah Al-Fayez when she said: "My freedom as a woman is restricted in respect to overseas travel and also restricted in terms of moving from one place to the other within my community, as a woman depends fully on males like her husband, sons or drivers.

"In addition to this," Al-Fayez said, "my freedom is also restricted in regard to my active participation in the development of society and making contributions or decisions along with other Saudi women related to women's and society affairs. We see ourselves as part of this society and fully aware of its affairs. Also, God

(1) Muneera Al-Osaimy, director general of nursing, chairperson and member of several scientific and charitable societies. She represented the Kingdom in conferences at the local, Gulf and international levels.

willing, as women we have capabilities and skills, like men, to address important societal issues."

Other participants noted that they see a woman's freedom is restricted in certain areas in which she is in need of more independence. They added that there should be adequate mechanisms for approaching public and private departments by women, and that services offered to women should match the number of women compared to men in the society. One of the participants said: "There is dire need for granting opportunities for Saudi women to benefit from the services offered to men without putting crippling conditions on benefiting from these services."

Speaking about some areas in which women's freedom is restricted, Aisha Al-Shihry said: "The conservative family attitude and society's view of women's behavior in general, make some women more reserved when expressing their viewpoints or addressing some problems. They may not feel free to express their opinions when it comes to certain social problems like divorce, neglect or child abuse, or a man not shouldering the responsibility of his family."

For her part, Haya Al-Sharif indicated: "In general I'm not seeing any restrictions on freedom, particularly as everyone has limits that they draw for themselves even before others draw them. What I've noticed is that women are not enjoying their rights to commercial activities and ownership. A woman cannot move without having a man with her."

Presenting a different view in regard to restrictions on the freedom of Saudi woman, 20 percent of the participants in this field survey indicated the need for more freedom for women. But they suggested the allocation of more

women-only places in which women can study, run a business, manage investments and receive the services she needs without mixing with men.

The survey reveals that the majority of participants are enjoying sufficient freedom within their society and that the restrictions they face are not preventing them from exercising their rights in accordance with the society's values and culture. Some participants noted that some deep-rooted misconceptions among some men have affected the opportunities available for women to serve themselves and their community. Others pointed to the need to expand fields appropriate to their nature, and to provide women-only administrative and educational environments and service that do not require them to mix with men in a way that restricts their freedom or limits their creative opportunities.

Saudi Women and Driving:

Saudi women driving cars is one of the issues that is discussed repeatedly in the local press. The issue fuels many debates, which examine the pros and cons or discuss the need of women to drive. Whoever follows these debates will notice that they include some objective discussions and others that reflect personal wishes of some people without taking into account the negative impacts of these wishes.

Dr. Amal Al-Suwaidani[1] referred to this when she said:

(1) Amal Saleh Al-Suwadani, a medical doctor specialized in physiotherapy from King Saud University.

"Women car driving is a nominal issue that has surfaced from time to time to show that Saudi women are deprived of their freedom. This is totally an untrue matter as Saudi women have succeeded in overcoming many problems and realized many accomplishments without driving causing a serious obstacle before her."

In our field survey of this issue, 60 percent of the participants expressed their fear of the consequences resulting from having Saudi woman drive a car. They worried about additional burdens shouldered by women for providing extra house duties or religious, social and security problems. One participant said, "If women drive, this will be an additional burden."

Other participants voiced their reservations about the whole issue saying that it solves one problem by creating bigger ones at the religious, social, economic, security and traffic levels. They added that even if women were allowed to drive, this would not offer an alternative to expatriate drivers.

While answering this question, Dr. Samar Al-Saqaf, quoted American researcher and journalist Tanya C. Hsu who wrote in the *Arab News*: "During my stay in Saudi Arabia, covering and not being able to drive were non issues. For the first time in my adult life, men spoke directly to me rather than to a physique. That is respect. If I get someone who can drive for me and enjoy luxury, should I refuse it?"

Dr. Muneera Al-Amail noted the same idea[1]. "I enjoy

(1) Muneera bint Mohammed Saleh Al-Ameel, head of mathematics department at the girls college of education. PhD. in mathematical statistics. Bsc in mathematics. She took part in summer programs of King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation for the Gifted. She is concerned with thinking skills.

my full freedom by having someone drive for me," she said. Driving "reduces womanhood which woman should preserve. Moreover, there are other problems resulting from this (having women drive)."

Those women who supported women driving cars cited the social dangers of using drivers who are not family members and the occasional urgent need a woman may have to go somewhere when her guardian is absent.

Dr. Muna Al-Mushait underlined this opinion[(1)] when she said: "Driving a car is very important for me as a physician. Sometimes I need to leave at different times and I also move from one hospital to another or to the outpatient clinics. It is not possible to have my driver waiting for me all day. The driver wastes the family's budgeted money not only in respect to his salary but also his overuse of the car and fuel consumption. Moreover, drivers sometimes harass children and housemaids."

Other participants underlined the need for addressing the issue in ways that have fewer consequences than having women begin to drive in Saudi Arabia. Siham Al-Shihry expressed this opinion and said, "It is not important to have a woman behind the wheel. We hope transportation alternatives can be found in the near future particularly in big cities. This will eliminate traffic congestion. The execution of the proposed public transportation project and trains as a means of transportation inside cities

(1) Mona bint Abdullah bin Saeed Al-Mushait, assistant professor, college of medicine, King Khaled University. Consultant obstetrics and maternity. Dean of the university female center. She has made a number of contributions in community service and women's education. Took part in several conferences and symposia.

would be more helpful. We do not want more cars, more environmental pollution and more traffic congestion."

The general picture of the participants' viewpoints about having Saudi women drive reveals that there are more shortcomings than the advantages. As a result, there is an urgent need for finding solutions for initiating public transport and even creating express trains inside cities, in addition to other means that guarantee participation of Saudi woman in national development and at the same time preserve the values and norms of Saudi society.

Saudi Women's Work:

The study reveals that work is of utmost important to Saudi women and society. A woman's work provides a way to express her character and intellect, boosts her self-esteem, and offers a source of income, and at the same time it represents a developmental and service dimension at various society sectors. All participants stressed the importance of work in their lives. Consequently, work in the life of Saudi women, is not an issue of discussion, the debate focuses on the fields in which Saudi women may find appropriate opportunities to work, their priorities and the reasons that drive them to take a certain type of work.

Fifty percent of the participants noted that caring for her is the first concern for women. Bringing up her children is the key job for Saudi women, and it's a job that they should not abandon but perform well. They also indicated that other jobs that are performed by women should not run contrary with this vital task.

In this context, a participant, who preferred not

to disclose her name, said: "A woman's work is very important as it realizes part of peculiarity in the life of Muslim women by creating the adequate atmosphere for educating girls and providing medical services to women and serves them in the areas they are in need of."

A number of participants noted that among the reasons that force Saudi women to work are the high costs of living and the need to establish a kind of balance in family income. Many women are forced to work to look after their families after the death of a spouse, divorce or other reasons.

In this respect, Dr. Brinji said: "A woman is half the society and her work enhances her character, increases her experiences, expands her thinking, grants her a kind of self-confidence and makes her feel that her relationship with her husband is not based upon need or dependence but based on reciprocity. Work also boosts the role of both mother and father in family building and society development."

She added: "A woman's work gives her self-assurance and confidence, morally and materially, and consequently this reflects in building a proper atmosphere for all family members."

In the same context, Norah Al-Fayez pointed out: "Work makes a woman depend upon herself in respect to income and strengthens her character. It makes her feel confident in her capabilities, increases her communication skills and even helps in her management of her home's affairs and upbringing of her children. Work is also important because a woman can actively contribute to

the development of her society and she can participate with men in realizing their country's economic and social growth. As a woman represents half the society, she shoulders half the burden."

Based on the aforementioned statements, the views of all participants underlined the importance of work. They mentioned a number of benefits and positives effect both for the woman herself and her society. They said work enhances a woman's character, increases her experience, grants her self-confidence and at the same time makes her an active participant in her society. At the same time, they underlined the importance of a woman's role in the upbringing of her children. The latter is an important task for the comprehensive development of Saudi Arabia's society and should be counted in the GDP.

Saudi Women's Relations with Relatives:

Social relations in general are subject to social upbringing within which one acquires an important part of his or her attitude in dealing with others. It is a natural observation that the environment in which a person is raised affects the relationships they have with others throughout their lives. This view is supported by 25 percent of participants. For instance, Haibat Mahmoud said: "Absolutism between men and women can be seen in all societies and it is not confined to the relations between Saudi men and women. Absolutism can be found in people with authoritarian tendencies whether they are men or women. The problem is in the culture of dialogue which some Saudis are accustomed to. But women can overcome

this problem by using their intelligence and establishing dialogue with those around her. By applying the culture of dialogue she can overcome many difficulties."

At the same time the degree of absolutism or dialogue in social relations is something relative and in many cases it is subject to the emotional situation and the type of the subject. This causes a difference in opinions among the participants in this field survey. Their varying views indicate the influence of personal accumulated experiences that could not be generalized. Sixty percent of participants indicated that the relationship of Saudi women with their relatives is characterized by dialogue and understanding.

Dr. Mona Al-Mushait highlighted this point of view: "My relationships with my male relatives are excellent. My father embodies love, compassion and affection. My brother is a beloved friend and my husband is also a beloved friend. Praise be to God, I was brought up in a family that does not differentiate between girls and boys and I married a man who respects women, and enjoys helping and taking care of me and my family."

Others emphasized that their relationships with their male relatives, particularly those who have guardian rights over them, are based on mutual respect. They are also convinced of the importance of a man's right to guard and take care of a woman as instructed by Islam. Dr. Amal Al-Suwaiyeh said: "My relationship with my men relatives is based on understanding and dialogue. After all, a woman has the right to express her opinion like a man and she has the freedom to manage her personal affairs like a man while taking into account the *sharia* controls."

On the other hand 25 percent of the study's participants said that their relationships with their male relatives are surrounded with absolutism and imposition of a certain opinion. Ilham Al-Shammary[1] expressed that point of view: "Our relationship with a man is often marred by his feelings of superiority and the weight of his obligation to have a guardianship over a woman, and his lack of confidence in the woman's ability to behave and protect herself. But we also have families who are aware of how to deal with women as human beings and not as creatures who cannot understand or behave well in life."

Five percent of participants denied any kind of absolutism from their male relatives, but at the same time they said there is a kind of male absolutism in the lives of other women. Norah Al-Fayez stated: "My relationship with men around me is good and better than many women around me and this has helped me reach my present position. I believe my personal skills, my diplomacy in dealing with others, and my concessions have played a role in my success. Still some people around me hold inferior views about women and little confidence in their abilities, even if women acquire a good education and experience. These men are filled with absolutism and suspicion in their dealings with women around them. To enter into dialogue with women is something unacceptable for them as they think that women have limited capabilities."

A surprising 10 percent of participants attributed men's absolutism to women themselves. Hadeel Al-Zaharny

(1) Ilham Ahmed Al-Shammary, journalist and writer in the daily Al-Yaum Arabic newspaper. She is concerned with human rights issues.

stated this succinctly:[1]: “A Saudi woman’s relationships with men are established by the woman herself. She can base her relationships on dialogue and understanding or she can have this relationship based on absolutism.”

In respect to the Saudi woman’s relationships with her male relatives, the field survey concluded that the nature of the relationships primarily depends on personal characteristics and social upbringing regardless of gender. The study concludes that in general these relationships are distinguished by mutual respect, dialogue and understanding but at the same time they are not free of a kind of absolutism and opinion imposition from the side of men due to their personal characters and due also to reasons related to the woman herself. Anyhow, such cases could be taken as a general trend applied on all society members.

(1) Hadeel Ibrahim Al-Zahrany graduated from the college of pharmacy of King Saud University. Director General of pharmaceutical care department at the health affairs in Tabuk region. Member of a number of medical committees. She supervises the training of students of health colleges and institutes in Tabuk region.

Women and Saudi Media

Saudi local media is an important area that reflects the position of Saudi woman. The media covers the causes of woman and gives women the opportunity to express themselves. In light of this, the field survey tackled the issue from four angles:

1- Media and Saudi Women's Causes

The majority of participants in this study (70 percent) agreed that in the past Saudi media did not give women's issues sufficient space. But in the last few years it started to give more coverage and space to these issues. One of the participants said: "Saudi media began to change in the past few years. Like others, I have noticed that the Saudi media began shedding light on some issues that concern women like employment and unemployment problems among women. But still the road is long."

Ilham Al-Shihry confirmed this: "Saudi media has changed much for the better although there are still some complicated issues that need to be tackled. Change needs patience. There is a hope that women's causes will be dealt with in a more comprehensive and thorough way."

In regard to the Saudi media's way of addressing and covering priorities of Saudi women, some participants said that this coverage is superficial and sensational. In this context Dr. Nada Brinji said: "To some extent, the Saudi media deals with women's causes in a superficial way and it does not cover the real problems that concern women in society."

Another participant said: "The Saudi media deals badly with women's issues. It either makes the topic look superficial and out of context or complicates and exaggerates issues for mere excitement."

Norah Al-Fayez underscored this: "The Saudi media coverage of women's causes does not, so far, take a correct path. It is overcome with extremism and lack of objectivity. It either adopts a very open approach, which is unacceptable in our society or, to the contrary, adopts the approach of extremism, lack of objectivity and lack of accuracy. Moreover, many important issues that concern woman are neglected or not covered well or fairly, and worst of all they are not discussed with those who are concerned with making decisions about them."

Thirty percent of the participants noted that Saudi media misrepresents women's issues. Huda Badawi[(1)] noted: "The media has incorrectly described Saudi women and portrayed their issues in a way that differs from reality."

For her part, Dr. Al-Bandary Al-Ajlan[(2)] said, "Saudi media is not portraying a real concept of Saudi woman

(1) A teacher in Jeddah province.

(2) Al-Bandary bint Abdulaziz Al-Ajlan, Associate Professor at the Girls' College of Education in Riyadh and deputy dean for female student's affairs.

but illustrates a model that does not represent all Saudi women."

The overall result of participants' views on the Saudi media portrayal of women's causes shows that in recent years this media began the process of granting Saudi women enough space to discuss issues concerning them, but there is room for improvement. It is still dealing with some issues in a superficial way; its portrayal of women is unrealistic; and its generalized models do not represent Saudi women.

Issues that Saudi Media Should Cover:

Participants in the field survey highlighted the functions that Saudi media should perform and the contributions media could make to empower women to actively participate in their society. Media could play a real role in alleviating women's suffering by relaying women's issues and communicating with society.

Participants cited a number of areas that need to be covered by the media. For instance, Ilham Al-Shammary mentioned the following areas: "Expansion of women's work fields and the judicial judgments that concern woman and protect her rights, particularly the ones related to divorce or abuse by the husband. Women should also be granted more opportunities to be involved in the media if they have the qualifications."

Suad Al-Asmary[1] suggested: "The media should shed light on government laws, and study and highlight

(1) Suad Zafer Al-Asmary, first Saudi economic editor in an international publication. Worked in Al-Watan newspaper and Forbes.

any negative aspects of these laws that hinder women's march. Qualified journalists involved in affairs that relate to women could undertake this task. Media could improve some people's perception of Saudi woman and transform women from a heavy burden and a source of evil to an active partner in development and life. This could be done by exploring positive role models and presenting them to society."

Dr. Amal Al-Suwayeh underlined the importance of media coverage of educational issues in a woman's life. She stated, "Major media coverage is required to enlighten woman regarding their key role and first function, which is the upbringing of children. This function requires that women are prepared and educated in the fundamentals of religion, the basic rules of child rearing, life affairs and women's social roles. Many women have assigned the upbringing of their children to housemaids who may not understand our religion and also to TV satellite channels, which undermine religion and spread corruption. These women have left the upbringing of their children to evil influences and only engage themselves with money collection and cosmetics and neglect education."

Dr. Mona Al-Mushait mentioned a number of areas that she sees as important for woman: "During pregnancy and after giving birth, the mother needs care from the whole society and from her family in particular. The media ignores this important aspect. The media should also write about children's rights and women's rights in regard to custody of her children. Through the media, women could learn how to deal with the others, including men, and how

to respect each other and be ambassadors of our country when we travel abroad."

Dr. Nada Brinji added, "The media should highlight the leading and distinguished role of woman at the regional and international levels. It should, with all transparency, cover complicated problems like family violence, poverty, reasons for delinquencies among some girls, and the causes of misunderstanding between spouses."

Based upon the above, the participants' views highlighted the role and importance of the media in addressing women causes. They mentioned a number of important areas that the Saudi media should cover. The media can enlighten woman about her key role and first function which is the upbringing of her children, as well as discussing her rights and duties and how to set a good example for her country when traveling abroad. Moreover, one of the areas that Saudi media should cover is highlighting the pioneering works and achievements realized by Saudi woman. Finally media efforts can help solve the problems facing Saudi women in her daily life.

2- Saudi Media Neutrality in Covering Women's Causes

Neutrality in media coverage is one of the controversial topics that have not yet been settled anywhere in the world. In reality it is impossible to have this neutrality due to the fact that those working in the media, like writers and editors, cannot distance themselves from their personal characteristics, their cultural values and social

upbringing. Accordingly, their work will no doubt reflect the personalities of those writers and editors on one side, the policies and objectives of the establishments in which they work, and the objectives they are working to achieve on the other. Thus, objectivity and neutrality in media coverage is something relative.

Participants in this field survey agree on this issue. Eighty percent of the participants see that Saudi media, in general and the press, in particular, adopt a one-way discourse that does not reflect the advantages and disadvantages of a topic. At the same time, as they have said, this discourse has a negative tendency and does not follow up on the issues that it covers.

This opinion is clearly stated by Squad Al-Asmary when she said, “Neutral newspapers are few or, in other words, few are the newspapers which adopt professionalism as a policy for publishing materials. Some newspapers publish scandalous news and focus on a woman as a party that stirs evil. These newspapers recall religious texts and opinions of Muslim scholars to support their positions. Other newspapers open the door wide in order to distract woman from her roots. Each of these newspapers turn a blind eye on women as an active and key partner in development and they rob women of the confidence they deserve.”

Other participants pointed to the masculine characteristics of Saudi media, which make the coverage of many topics important to women superficial. It’s difficult for male writers to accurately express a woman’s identity. Haya Al-Sharif said: “Neutrality does not exist in

our society. There are human beings who work in the press and there is no way to get rid of personal opinions and personal tendencies, beliefs and thoughts. Most masculine coverage is against women's issues and most women's coverage is strongly in favor. So only in rare cases can we find moderation and logic."

On the other hand, a group of participants mentioned some media coverage of women's issues that is close to neutrality. For instance, Dr. Mona Al-Mushait noted: "The Saudi press has played a positive role in supporting the woman's march to development, although I blame some writers with narrow views who endeavor to set women aside and continue to hold opinions that marginalize them."

Ilham Al-Shammary echoed the same opinion: "Some newspapers devote a lot of space to women's concerns, while others ignore these issues. The involvement of TV and radio is weak and far from reality. Still the media has a fear of entering the women's world due to some extremist opinions."

In general, the majority of participants see that the Saudi media's treatment of women's causes falls short. It reflects a one-opinion system that does not give women enough opportunity to tackle issues along with their positive and negative aspects. A limited number of participants noted that a new trend is emerging in the Saudi media's coverage of women's issues, and some added that there have been new media efforts to play a neutral role.

Capability of Male Writers to Discuss Saudi Women's Issues on their Behalf:

Male writers, from time to time, use the Saudi media to discuss topics and issues that concern women. Their discussions reflect their views on the position of a woman in regard to her needs, problems she faces or in regard to her enlightenment in matters that concern her. The field survey tried to measure women's views on this issue. Participants are divided between three different views.

Fifty percent of participants noted that male writers are incapable of presenting and discussing women's issues and aspirations. They pointed out that male writers cannot reflect on women's reality and needs or provide acceptable solutions to their problems. A number of participants expressed their reasons for supporting this view.

For instance, Sameera Al-Maharabi[1] said: "I don't think men are capable of doing that because it's the party concerned that is most capable of expressing their opinion."

Another participant noted: "I don't think they (men) are capable of discussing these issues as they are far removed from women's needs and even when they know them (the issues) they measure them according to their own needs."

Dr. Nada Brinji indicated: "Men are incapable of doing this because their opinions reflect their own view of matters. This view often differs from the woman's view."

The second opinion, represented by 10 percent of

(1) Sameera Saad Addin Al-Maharabi, Msc. Holder. Member of an educational institution in the Western region.

participants, differs dramatically from the first. Participants holding this opinion underlined that male writers are more capable than women in discussing women's issues as they have more experience than women in the media and have farsightness and rationality that enable them to perform this vital role. One participant said: "Male writers are more capable than female ones in presenting and discussing women issues in the media as sometimes women can be emotional or biased with one aspect of the problem."

The third opinion was moderate in tackling the issue. This opinion is represented by 40 percent of participants. Dr. Samar Al-Saqaf said, "The matter is not a matter of man or woman, but thought and objectivity."

Norah Al-Fayez added, "Some men discuss women's issues in a fair, objective and balanced way. There are others who discuss these topics without any kind of objectivity. A third group is never concerned with women's issues and causes. I think women's causes, like any other issues in society, should be discussed and treated by all society segments on the basis that men and women are partners in life."

Aisha Al-Shihry expressed a similar opinion when she said: "Sometimes there are writers who are capable of tackling some Saudi women's issues as they have the journalistic and social experience. They look for objective solutions and present correct observations and opinions. Sometimes, a woman is more competent to write about a cause because she feels the problem before writing or one of her relatives or a friend may have suffered from these problems. As result, she writes in an honest way due to

her closeness to the experience. Some other men or also women write in a shallow or exaggerated way."

The opinions of participants in regard to men's ability to discuss women's causes on their behalf were divided into three categories. Fifty percent of participants see that male writers are incapable of discussing and presenting woman causes in a way that reflects her reality, needs and aspirations. Another 40 percent of participants noted that the matter is not associated with being a man or woman but with thought and objectivity because women's causes are social issues that can be discussed by both men and women as partners in life. The third group, represented by 10 percent of participants, believed that men are more capable than women to discuss women's issues due to their longer and wider experience in writing for the media.

Saudi Woman and Western Media

Further to our discussion on how the media deals with women's causes at the local level, this chapter discusses how Western media deals with issues pertaining to Saudi woman.

Lack of Understanding the Reality of Saudi Women

In regard to Western media's understanding of the reality of Saudi women and their cultural values, 80 percent of participants said that the Western media does not understand the position of Saudi women. They referred to a number of reasons that can explain why the Western media lacks understanding of Saudi woman causes.

Some attributed this lack of understating to a defect in the Saudi media. Siham Al-Shammary said: "A Westerner who examines our media will, no doubt, get a wrong idea and an exaggerated, bad picture of the reality of woman. This picture portrays the suffering of living in the 'closed' society! Our media is not portraying the bright side of Saudi woman. The media is not demonstrating the active role of Saudi women who are creative in all competitive areas. It

is regrettable to see famous Western media establishments honoring Saudi female scientists at a time when our local media is not giving due importance for this matter."

Dr. Amal Al-Suwaiyeh expresses the same opinion: "I believe it (the western media) lacks understanding because it gets information from some media outlets that focus on a certain side (of a problem) over another or they focus on negative rather than positive aspects. The Western media may not understand some matters related to the rules of our *sharia*. While we see *hijab* as a protection and dignity for women, the Western media may look at it as coverage of a woman's "brain" or concealing an abnormality on her face."

Another participant said, "The Western media is full of stereotypes which affect its coverage. The major proof for this is that when visitors come to Saudi Arabia they are surprised by what they see. We have contributed to this ignorance as we have not worked hard to make others know the reality of our situation."

Erroneous Knowledge Sources:

However, Suad Al-Asmary attributed this to a lack of professionalism on the part of Western media. She said: "It (the Western media) is not fully aware of this reality as it relies on few sources for its information and writes about it from an office. This coverage lacks professionalism in covering the issues related to Saudi women. The Western media does not know the surroundings in which Saudi women live and so it manages to write about her from a circle far away from hers."

Haya Al-Sharif blamed the sources used by Western media to get information about Saudi woman. She said: “The Western media does not understand the reality of Saudi women. Its source of information may, in most cases, totally black out on all women’s bright sides. Probably they hear stories about women who faced some kind of suffering and as a result the image that emerges is that all Saudi women are treated unfairly, kept apart, guided by others and ignorant.”

At the same line, Aisha Al-Shihry said, “We should reflect an honest picture of ourselves to the West and present our problems and their solutions accurately as they are part of reality. There were families who lived in Saudi Arabia who can convey a good picture to the West and there are individuals who faced negative situations and as a result spread a bad image about our country as a whole without any objectivity or neutrality.”

Deliberate Distortion:

Ten percent of the participants believed that the Western media understands the reality of Saudi woman but deliberately distorts her image and looks for shortcomings to meet its objectives. This opinion was stated by Dr. Munaeera Al-Amail, “The Western media understands well the reality of Saudi women as the work of this media is well organized with set and studied objectives. This media aims mainly to put an end to her (the Saudi woman’s) identity.”

Only ten percent of participants believed that the Western media presents sincere coverage as well as

negative. Ninety percent of the participants said that Western media's objectives are not really in the interest of Saudi women even if the media claims it is trying to liberate and rescue them. Participants expressed this view in different forms.

For instance, Haibat Mahmoud said, "A husk may appear appetizing but in reality it is poisonous and not good for eating. Within this logic some may think that the Western media is working for the good and benefit of women, but actually its long-term objectives are damaging to our society. The pillar of this society is the identity of a woman as a mother, sister, wife and daughter. If this woman becomes righteous, then the society will be so and if she is corrupted, then the society will become corrupted. When they (the West) criticize *hijab*, for instance, this reflects hatred for a woman who is abiding by her religion and principles. A Saudi woman is a decision-maker in her family and one who has her rights contrary to their women who are always focused on themselves."

About the political and economic objectives of the Western media, Dr. Mona Al-Mushait said:

"The Western media has beliefs when covering our causes. Saudi Arabia is the heart of the Islamic world and the biggest oil exporting country in the world. This, in addition to hot issues in the region, arouses the curiosity of Westerners who want to know Saudi society. There are dominating forces in the Western media who hold anti-Saudi policies."

From a religious perspective, Dr. Amal Al-Suwaiyeh said: "In most cases, the Western media wants to distort the image of Islam by highlighting women's causes,

particularly in the Saudi society, as running contrary to the freedom that women should enjoy. They do not know that in our religion we enjoy full freedom. They focus on the Saudi society as this society, praise be to God, is the one most abiding by *sharia* and because the whole world sees Saudi Arabia as the birthplace of Islam."

Norah Al-Fayez stressed the intention of the Western media in targeting the Saudi society. She said, "The objectives of the Western media are clear and they are not for our improvement or development as some expect, but are libelous and with a goal of creating disunity and derangement in Saudi society. We should realize their purposes, ignore their coverage, strongly defend our values, principles and objectives and never allow ourselves to be affected by or interact with their ideas."

On the other hand, around 5 percent of the participants indicated that there is a portion of objectivity and honesty in coverage by the Western media. Ilham Al-Shammary said: "Some have tendentious objectives, but we could not deny that some media outlets in the West are honest. We are afraid to face our realties and weak points, so we accuse them all of conspiracy against us."

Aisha Al-Shihry agreed to that view and added: "There are some who have honesty and really look at Saudi society. They write from this honest angle. But there is a group that always writes about injustice and never sees the bright face. We should always reflect an honest image for the West and present and solve our problems as they emanate from reality."

Clear Bias:

The majority of participants emphasized that when the Western media writes about Saudi women's causes it has specific political, economic or religious objectives and strategies. These women noted that the Western media is far from being objective and neutral in addressing the causes of Saudi woman.

Norah Al-Fayez drew links between the Western media's objectives and its objectivity as she said, "Even if in very few cases, there is objective coverage, objectivity of the Western media as a whole remains unclear and unfair. This media, in many cases, sides with a group for the sake of creating disunity in our society. Whatever its coverage, I don't see it as objective, honest or sincere and we should never trust it."

Speaking about the Western media's exploitation of Saudi women's issues to pass its objectives, Dr. Naeema Al-Ghamdi said:

"The Western media is biased and unfair. It calls for uncontrolled freedom for women claiming that it's trying to help her obtain more rights. There is a wide difference between this and that."

This is also referred to by Dr. Amal Al-Suwaidani: "The Western media demonstrates the negative side of women in extreme cases, which are few, limited and happen in societies around the world. The media focuses on these cases without shedding light on other women who properly represent the society. Our society includes many, many creative Saudi women in all fields."

Overall Outcomes:

Thus the viewpoints of participants in the field survey revealed a consensus that the Western media does not understand the reality of Saudi women. Some participants attributed this lack of understanding to the Western media's reliance on information sources that do not represent Saudi women. They said that the media depends upon extreme individual cases or it directly contacts women who have personal problems. This media uses this lack of understanding to meet its objectives and deliberately abuses Islam and Muslims by defaming the image of Saudi woman.

Conclusion:

Saudi Women... Obstacles and Ambitions

(Dr. Badriya Al-Bishr)

An objective review of Saudi women's issues included in this book would reveal a fact that the eye of a prudent critic cannot ignore. This fact is that Saudi women have made rapid strides in the areas of education and knowledge, particularly in the past few years. Women have realized scientific and professional accomplishments that cannot be ignored. They are now active in their society and so it is not unusual for women to express their views in many conferences, symposia and public and private events with confidence and conviction within the principles and values they believe in.

Honest women inside and outside the Kingdom appreciate the important role Saudi women play. When America's First Lady Laura Bush visited Saudi Arabia and met a group of Saudi women in October 2007, she said: "I expected people to be very private and that it would

be difficult to communicate. But they're like women everywhere. They are strong."

Karen Hughes, former U.S. undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public relations, made similar remarks: "I have to say I was impressed by the Saudi women I met, and by their outspokenness and their intelligence. They clearly feel very much a part of the debate in their society, even though I think for Americans that's hard for us to understand given that they are not allowed to vote in their society. But they clearly feel that they have a voice, and they are able to speak out, and they are able to influence their society."

We Saudi women realize that we are not in need of others to witnesses our accomplishments, but these others continue to speak for themselves or on behalf of others about our causes in numerous and tireless efforts. They want to make their cultural and civilizational accomplishments a unique and comprehensive global model to be imposed on others—willingly or unwillingly. They ignore the fact that even if the world is being influenced by the materialistic side of their Western civilization, nations want to maintain their own cultural identity. Saudi Arabia does not accept assimilation in a civilization that is concerned with the body only and neglects the soul.

This certainly does not mean that Saudi women have reached utmost perfection. We realize that our society has just taken the reins of comprehensive development in various fields. These changes impose on Saudi women a

new reality that they should deal with in an effective way without affecting the delicate balance of their position in society and their religious beliefs.

Saudi Women's Ambitions

Saudi women seek to achieve an important balance in life and society, as they aspire to be partners in the development of their country. The key issues they face in the march toward the renaissance of their civilization include:

1- Continue to review the priorities of Saudi women and choose realistic causes in order to participate in the country's development in the shortest period of time and with the least number of losses. And to do this within the *sharia*, which considers women's needs and preserves her rights as good productive citizens.
2- Constructive interaction with any work or activity needed by Saudi women. Study and evaluate these works and activities to determine the pros and cons, without prejudging or excessive sensitivity.
3- Launch initiatives to open new areas that suit the status of women in Saudi society and meet her special needs.
4- Activate the concept of "distance work," which allows a woman to work and be productive while staying at home and, at the same time, promotes participation in the national economy and social development. Thus, women can combine work, and being a productive member of society, with her

original social role at home, which is equally valued. We refer here to a report released by the United Nations in 1985, which underlined that women's household production is worth 25-40 percent of the industrial countries' gross national product (GNP). The results of another study conducted in October 1996, noted that most of the 46 million home-based businesses in the United States are run by women who work to maintain a better balance between family requirements and society needs. This concept prevails in major industrial countries particularly in Europe and the United States. The concept has provided work and production opportunities for men and women alike.

5- Highlight the achievements of Saudi women at the local and international levels by intensifying media coverage of women's accomplishments in the areas of education and knowledge in the Kingdom.

Obstacles Facing Saudi Women

To fully realize the ambitions that Saudi women aspire to, it is necessary to look at the obstacles facing them and to work hard to remove these barriers. These obstacles are originally a philosophical theorization that runs contrary to the culture of Saudi women. Among these obstacles:

1- Many of those calling for reform of Saudi women's affairs propose ideas that emanate - knowingly or unknowingly - from imported experiences that have not proven their value in their place of

origin, nor have they been found to be beneficial in a different environmental culture. This makes the Saudi woman live in conflict between her sincere desire for further progress and advancement and the desires of those who want her to be a deformed model of alien cultures.

2- Some of the problems facing Saudi women have caused enmity between different hostile parties, which is preventing solutions. Instead of joining together to find good solutions the issues become the object of local dispute between opposing intellectual groups. As a result the solutions proposed for these problems are temporary or unrealistic.

3- Media coverage of Saudi women's achievements is highly selective. Some media highlights marginal achievements and in many cases they exaggerate those marginal works at the expense of major accomplishments. For instance, they may honor a Saudi woman airline pilot, an equestrian or another unusual profession that is not representative of many women working to contribute and develop society. To the contrary, some people believe such work negatively affects society's values and culture. In contrast, major accomplishments of Saudi woman in the fields of science, medicine, physics and others - which are worthy to be highlighted as a civilizational achievement for Saudi women - are concealed.

What a Saudi woman should understand is that her evolution is subject to the values of Saudi society.

The objective of her participation in the promotion of development in her country is to be productive and to take part in this development according to the values of her religion and culture, and never look to the day when this instinctive balance is shaken. If this happens, the equation would be upside down and both individuals and society would reap its bitter fruit. While Saudi woman are enjoying genuine involvement in development, they are proving their capabilities and excellence in the fields of education, medicine, nursing, management, business, and in humanitarian and voluntary areas. What after all, is required from Saudi woman? And what is behind the calls for granting her greater freedom than she is experiencing now?

Despite the repeated successes realized by Saudi woman in different fields, which were mentioned by more than one writer in this book, we, as Saudi women, were astonished to find that women's issues are raised whenever the Western media describes Saudi society. We consider this as a flagrant intervention in our internal affairs and evidence of disrespect for the differences in other countries and cultures, a matter that runs contrary to international agreements. It is rational to say that what one society considers as women's empowerment, may not be considered so in other cultures and communities. Thus if we are interested and keen to enter into genuine communication with others, we have to admit that values, traditions and cultures differ from one region to another and that these values, traditions and cultures derive their fundamentals from the religious values and the norms that prevail in these societies.